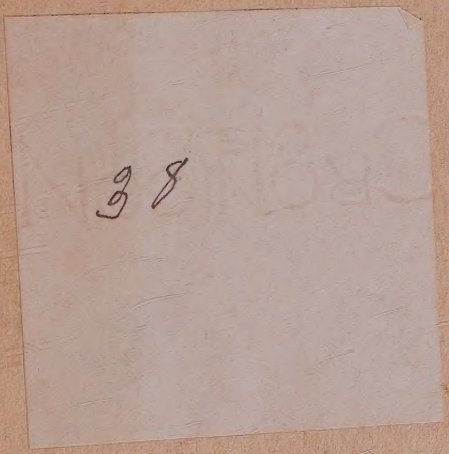
EAGLES OF THE SKY

AMBROSE NEWCOMB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AVIATION

EAGLES OF THE SKY

OR

With Jack Ralston Along the Air Lanes

BY

AMBROSE NEWCOMB

Author of "The Sky Detectives," etc., etc.

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EAGLES OF THE SKY

CHAPTER I

READY FOR BUSINESS

When the "Big Boss" at Secret Service Headquarters in Washington sent Jack Ralston and his pal, Gabe Perkiser, to Florida with orders to comb the entire Gulf Coast from the Ten Thousand Islands as far north as Pensacola and break up the defiant league of smugglers, great and small, that had for so long been playing a game of hide-and-seek with the Coast Guard revenue officers, the task thus assigned was particularly to the liking of those two bold and dependable sky detectives.

They loved nothing better than *action*—never felt entirely happy unless matching their wits against those of skulking law breakers—while to sup with danger, and run across all manner of thrilling adventures—that was a daily yearning with them.

Since so much of their work must of necessity take them over that vast stretch of salt water

lying between the Florida coast and the far distant Mexican shore line, the wise men in Washington had supplied Jack with a speedy plane of the amphibian type, capable of making landings either on shore or in any of the numerous inlets dotting the coast, it being equipped with both aluminum pontoons and adjustable wheels.

Jack had spent several days at the Capital, conferring with various high officials, being thus put in possession of every available scrap of reliable information at the disposal of the Department.

He had also been given documents of authority, calling upon each and every Government agent in all Florida to afford him any possible assistance, should he require such backing while learning the identity of the "higher-up" capitalists guilty of financing the secret clique that had been giving the revenue men such trouble recently.

The fact was well known that besides the valuable *caches* of unset diamonds, and other precious stones, coming surreptitiously into the country without yielding the customary heavy duty imposed on them, there was also being smuggled into the innumerable lonely bayous and inlets of the lengthy coast line vast quantities of contraband in violation of the eighteenth amend-

ment, also batches of undesirable aliens like Chinese, anarchists and Bolsheviks, such riffraff as Uncle Sam had been holding off under a strict ban.

So, too, it was understood that besides the fleet of swift, small power-boats employed night after night in this profitable game of mocking the Treasury Department, latterly the smugglers had been freighting their cargoes by means of airplanes that would be able to land the contraband stuff in lonely places far back of the low coast sections.

It was therefore a monumental task, covering a wide field of operation and with constant peril hovering over the heads of the two adventurous aviators who had undertaken so joyously to spread the net and draw its meshes about the offenders.

Their preparations having been completed, they were waiting in an isolated little bayou surrounded by inaccessible swamps and mangrove islands ready to take off with the coming of the friendly shades of night.

To those who enjoyed reading the preceding volume of this series of aviation adventures, where Jack and "Perk," in order to get their man—one of the boldest and most successful counterfeiters known in the annals of crime—found it necessary to fly across the Mexican

boundary line and snatch their victim out of an extinct volcano crater that had once been the fort of the fierce Yaqui Indian tribe,* will think it a rather far cry for the Sky Detectives to be detailed to active duty some thousands of miles distant, and in the extreme southeastern corner of the republic.

So it always must be with the famous Secret Service men—their motto, like that of our present day Boy Scouts, is "Be Prepared"; for day and night they must hold themselves in readiness to start to the other side of the world if necessary—China, Japan, India, the Philippines perhaps—detailed to fetch back some notorious malefactor wanted by Uncle Sam, and information of whose presence in distant lands has reached Headquarters.

As a rule it was Perk's duty to see that their flying ship was well stocked with all necessary supplies, from liquid fuel and lubricating oil down to such food stores as they would require, even if forced to remain for days, or a week, without connections along the line of groceries and commissary stuff.

Perk himself was an odd mixture of New England and Canuck blood, one branch of his family living in Maine, while the other resided across the border. Hence Perk sometimes chose

*See *"The Sky Detectives;* or *How Jack Ralston Got His Man."*

to call himself a Yankee; and yet for a period of several years he had been a valued member of the Northwestern Mounted Police, doing all manner of desperate stunts up in the cold regions of Canada.

He was considerably older than his gifted chum and had seen pretty hot service flying in France while with Pershing's army in the Argonne. It was his knowledge of aviation in general that had caused Jack to pick him as his assistant when the Government decided to fight fire with fire, by pitting their own pilots and aircraft against those employed by the powerful combine of smuggling aces.

Sometimes it chanced that Jack, for good and sufficient reasons of his own, did not fully explain the necessity for making plans along certain lines.

This was not because he lacked confidence in his loquacious chum's ability to keep a still tongue in his head or exercise due caution, but usually through a desire to make doubly sure of his own ground before submitting the arrangement to Perk's sharp criticism, which Jack valued even more than the other suspected.

Consequently Perk, with the Yankee half of his blood stirred by an ever present curiosity, wanted to know and invariably asked numer-

ous questions in the endeavor to find a leading clue.

It was in the late Fall and already the advance guard of the winter tourist crowds had begun to arrive from the North, in ever increasing numbers, all set for an enjoyable winter in the sunny resorts of both coasts.

Jack had already made quite a thorough investigation and picked up some important clues that he meant to run down in hopes one of them might lead to definite results.

The amphibian floated on the surface of the isolated bayou with glimpses of the open gulf toward the golden west forming an alluring picture as seen between the jaws of sand points, with palmettoes guarding the entrance to the sheltered nook.

It was just sunset, and inside another hour the night would have advanced far enough to permit their departure on the first leg of their intended flight up the coast.

Perk was exceedingly fond of his pipe and choice tobacco, and looked the picture of contentment as he squatted in his seat, scratching his ankle, where a burning sensation told him he had once again been visited by the tiny but venomous red-bug pest which he hated with all his heart.

"Drat the little beggars," he was muttering as he kept on digging at his leg, "they sure do beat

anything I ever run acrost in all my wanderin's. It ain't so bad to be slappin' at pesky skeeters, 'cause I'm used to sich bloodsuckers; but sandflies, and' jiggers, an' redbugs make a combination that'd be hard to beat."

"Try that kerosene again, brother," advised Jack, who somehow seemed to be a favored one, since he was immune from similar attacks, and greatly envied on that account by his unlucky pal.

"Yeah!" growled the usually good tempered Perk, "I've rubbed that on, an' witch hazel, an' all sorts o' lotions till I guess now I smell like a stick-pot set out, with old rags smoulderin' to keep the skeets away. Salt water helps a mite, but this scratchin' which I just can't let up on to save my life, makes things worse right along."

Thereupon he kicked off his shoes, removed his socks, and thrust both feet over the side to dabble them in the saline water of the lagoon.

"Keep an eye out for that big 'gator we scared off the bank a while back," warned Jack, wickedly, "he might think it was a wild duck splashing, and try to pot it for his supper."

"Huh! mebbe now that's about the only way to get relief—let him snap the foot off an' it won't itch me any more."

Nevertheless, despite this reckless assertion Perk quickly ceased his splashing and resumed

his footgear, heroically refraining from rubbing the affected parts. After a short interval of staring at the glowing heavens, as if the sight fairly fascinated him, Perk again spoke, this time finding something of more importance than insect bites to talk about.

"Wall," he drawled in his customary slow fashion, "here's hopin' we ain't agoin' to be knocked out in our calculations tonight, but get a line on what the boys are doin' up the coast, eh, partner?"

"Won't be our fault if we don't," said Jack, who doubtless recognized from the signs that his mate had something in his mind, which he meant to spring on him by cautious insinuations and half questions.

"A right decent crate that was we saw pass over early this mornin', I'd say, old hoss," continued Perk, nodding his head as if to punctuate his remarks and also to cause his thoughts to flow more smoothly. "I had a good peep at it as we lay behind that bunch o' saw palmetto out front, an' unless I'm away off in my guess, she was a Curtiss Robin ship—a big crate in the bargain."

"They need them big in their line of business," Jack went on significantly. "A full cargo of wet goods is pretty heavy, you know, Perk."

"You said it, partner," assented the other, grinning amiably and yet with a shade of Yankee cunning. "An' what's more to the p'int the guy handlin' the stick was no slouch at his job, b'lieve me. I wonder now could he have been that Oscar Gleeb we been hearin' so much about since comin' down here,—got an idea he might abeen, ain't you, Boss?"

"Just as like as not," Jack told him.

"Huh! Some go as far as to say he used to be a Boche pilot in that fuss across the big water," continued Perk, reflectively, as though certain memories of the long-ago had awakened in his brain — recollections that breathed of action, staccato machine-gun fire, exploding shells, and the terrible odor of gas that had poisoned so many of his former mates.

"Yes, they said there wasn't any doubt about that," Jack asserted. "After the war was over and he couldn't find work in his home country, he managed to get to America and has cut quite a figure in flying circles. I reckon he was tempted by the big money in the smuggling game to take a job with this combine along the coast and has been fetching heaps of cargoes ashore from vessels anchored far out on the gulf, or even across from Bimini or Santa Fe Beach near Havana over in Cuba.".

"By jinks!" ejaculated Perk, "that there's the

place we learned they was shippin' Chinks over to Florida from, ain't it Jack, boy?"

"Just what it was," admitted the other. "It seems that this big combine, made up of rich American sporting men, with a mixture of Cubans and adventurers from all nations, doubles up in crashing Uncle Sam's coast gates with aliens, as well as hard stuff in bottles and barrels."

"Me, I'm jest awonderin'?" continued Perk, "whether it could a'happened that this same Oscar Gleeb an' me ever hit it up and had an air duel tryin' to strafe each other when flyin' across No-Man's-Land over there. Kinder like to meet up with him so we could run over our scraps an' see if one o' us sent t'other down in a blazin' coffin. It'd be funny if it turned out that way."

"Queer things do happen sometimes," agreed Jack, yawning. "This warm day's made me feel a bit lazy but as soon as we get a move on all that will slip away like fog under the morning sun."

"I say, partner, how 'bout that Greek sponger we talked with when we dropped in at Tarpon Springs t'other day — you kinder s'pected he knew a heap more about these goin's-on than he wanted us to grab, even if we was jest s-posed to be Northern tourists, bent on havin' a fishin' spree later on when big tarpon strike in around

Fort Myers—could them spongers have a hand afetchin' in bottled stuff, or ferryin' Chinks over from some island halfway point?"

"Some folks seem to think that possible," he was told. "After looking over the ground, and getting the opinion of a heap of people who ought to have an intelligent opinion covering the facts known and suspected, I've come to the conclusion that if ever there was a time when you could play safe by suspecting everybody you met of having some sort of money interest in this big game, it's down along the Florida west coast and like as not over toward Miami just the same. I'm not trusting my secrets to a living soul, saving a few Government agents to whom I've been directed by my superiors—and I'm even a bit leery about some of that bunch."

"Yeah! From this time on seems to me we'd be wise to play a lone hand, an' not bother about takin' any gyps into our confidence, eh what, Jack?"

"You never said truer words, my boy," assented the other, smiling as he noted the look of pleasure flashing across the bronzed face of his pal at thus having his own opinion confirmed; for Perk valued a few words of praise from Jack far above any other source.

"Kinder get to thinkin' that Greek sponger—Alexis was his name, if my memory ain't gimme

the bounce—was a bit o' a sharper, an' knew beans in the bargain from the way them black eyes o' his'n kept watchin' us all the time we asked questions, just like we'd heard people sayin' queer things concernin' how easy it was to grab any quantity o' bottled stuff if on'y you had the ready cash, an' a good eye for winkin'."

"We may know more about Alexis before we're through with this trip," was all Jack would say concerning the matter. "On my part I'm shaking hands with myself because we were smart enough to camouflage our ship with green stuff for that pilot passed over and could have glimpsed our crate lying half hidden here, and through his glasses — which I understand they all carry—made out how it didn't match up with any of the aircraft they use in their business."

"Thanks to you, partner," Perk hastened to confess. "If it all depended on my poor head I kinder guess I'd a'slipped up right then an' there an' give the hull scheme away which would a'been a danged shame, an' busted the game higher'n a kite."

"We make a pretty good team, matey," said Jack. "Sometimes it's you that goes loco, and threatens to step off your base, and then another time I feel myself side-slipping and have to lean on you to hold my own. That's just how it should

be with partners—give and take, with never a bleat if our calculations go wrong."

"It's right nice o' you to talk that way, brother," Perk hastened to assert, beaming with pride and making out as if tempted to begin scratching again when Jack reaching around, gently steered his clutching fingers away from the itching locality, at which Perk heaved a relieved sigh and nodded his thanks.

"The sky has lost most of that glorious color," mentioned the head pilot, "and before long now we can be hopping-off. Our first job will be to swing down the coast and learn if there seems to be anything going on among the southern islands in this beastly mangrove section where a man could easy enough lose himself for keeps among the countless water passages and inlets. See here, what's the matter with you, staring that way, Perk?".

"Wouldn't that jar you now," snapped the other, "that Robin ship is headin' back this way; or else some other crate that looks like its twin!"

CHAPTER II

THE CURTISS-ROBIN PLANE

Jack, a bit startled by his companion's sudden exclamation, took a good look and hastened to remark:

"Reckon now you hit the nail on the head that time, Perk and it's heading this way in the bargain. Why d'ye suppose we didn't see the crate before?"

"Huh! I kinder guess now," Perk went on to say, "she bust out o' that little fog cloud right to the south—a'swoopin' up the coast, you notice, partner, don't you?"

"Sure is," assented Jack, as though that small circumstance assumed some importance in his eyes, as well as those of his comrade.

"Ginger pop! but mebee I ain't glad we didn't show any hurry to kick off this camouflage green stuff, thinkin' it'd served its purpose okay and could be knocked into the discard. See how they keep dodging' in an' out like they might be scourin' every foot o' shore line, little bays back o' these mangrove islands an' all. Strikes me

they're a'searchin' for somethin', Jack, which might be the pair o' us, eh, what?"

"Right you are!" snapped Jack, without hesitating a second.

"Which, I take it, would mean there might a'been some sort o' little leak up at Headquarters, hang the luck, when we figured we'd got the gang buffaloed right smart. Don't think they c'n lamp us lyin' here, do you, Boss?"

"Small chance of that, boy, if only we lie low, and make no move apt to attract their attention," Perk was told in a confident tone that effectually calmed his rising alarm.

He hastened to settle down in a position where he could thrust his glasses between interstices in the green covering of the fusilage and wings so as to keep close tabs on the advancing plane without making any particular movement of arms or body.

"How?" asked Jack, a few seconds later, when he fancied his mate must have made up his mind as to the identity of the flying ship.

"Curtiss-Robin crate, that's right, Jack an' the same we saw before," replied the observer, excitedly. "Hey! guess now they got a glass up there too. I sure saw the sun shinin' on somethin' bright, 'cause the old boy's still on deck to chaps that high up."

"I've discounted that fact long ago, Perk; men

engaged in the desperate game they're playing night after night would need such a useful instrument, so's to keep a sharp lookout for Coast Guard boats or bunches of revenue men lying in ambush close to the place they expected to land a wet cargo, or a couple of high-pay Chinks, it might be."

"Then you got an idea they must have a spy up in Washington—a sneaker who c'n find out what's bein' hatched up so's to cook their goose an' that he manages to get warnin' down here to the workin' crews so's to put 'em on their guard —is that it, partner?"

"Looks that way—that's all I can say, Perk. Now lie low and don't do any talking, though with their crate kicking up all that row I reckon there'd be small chance of their hearing us even if we shouted."

Perk was chuckling to himself at a great rate and could not keep from taking advantage of the invitation Jack had really extended to say:

"Yeah! an' I kinder guess now we got one thing they ain't, which is a silencer on our engine that'll keep it muzzled, even if it does knock off a bit o' our speed when we happen to use it. Luckiest thing ever you managed to get the Big Boss to send us such a bully contrivance that seems to work jest great. Listen to the racket they're kickin' up right now—enough to tell any

chump ten miles off a crate's headin' his way. Jerusalem crickets! but ain't I glad we're fixed as we are."

The ship far up in the heavens was almost directly over them by this time and Perk relapsed into silence, being vastly interested in watching it passing over.

Possibly he had his eyes glued on the figures —there were two occupants in the Robin's cabin he could easily see—leaning over and doubtless closely scrutinizing the intricacies of the ragged shoreline below, hoping to make important discoveries.

If the leading figure, piloting the craft, was actually Oscar Gleeb, one-time noted Hun ace over in the Argonne, it might be Perk, with his past war history rising up to thrill him afresh, may have found himself half expecting to hear a terrific explosion close by on the shore as the German flier let drop some sort of bomb, with the idea of striking their concealed bus which his keen eyes might have detected despite their wonderful camouflage.

But nothing like that came to pass and the cruising ship kept moving in a northerly direction, growing less distinct as miles were being covered at the fast clip it swept along.

"Cripes! that was worth somthin' to glimpse, bet your sweet life, partner," Perk finally ob-

served as he ventured to make a little movement, feeling dreadfully cramped and the danger of discovery growing momentarily less as the first shades of coming evening began to gather around the secluded cove. "Jest as like as not they started away down toward the tip o' the mainland, an' hev been examinin' every mile o' the coast, bent on doin' a clean job while they're at it. An' if they meet up with no luck mebbe now they'll make up their minds it was only a false alarm, and let her go at that."

Presently they could no longer glimpse the faintest sign of the scout plane—when last seen it was still heading up the coast as though making for some destination where action awaited the members of its daring crew.

"The passing of that crate settles one thing, anyway," observed Jack presently.

"As what, partner?" queried Perk, who had already begun to denude the anchored amphibian of its covering, as though it was settled they need no longer fear being spied upon from above.

"We needn't bother striking into the south when starting out to look for suspicious lights, such as would tell of business being put through —those boys are right now heading for their rendezvous and it's our game to chase after them,

as soon as nightfall makes it safe to get a move on."

"That suits me fine, Jack old hoss. I'm right sick o' keepin' our nose stuck so close to the ground—me for the high places where I c'n get my lungs filled with clean air—this swamp stuff don't make no sort o' hit with me, I'm tellin' you. Gosh! looky at that bunch o' measly big pelicans flappin' their wings as they fly close to the water, headin' to some island where they have a rookery, like as not. An' Jack, honest to goodness if I didn't see the head an' knobby eyes o' a monster scaly 'gator stickin' up out o' the water in the lagoon jest now. Got me goofy, this sorter thing, an' I'm asighin' for the air lanes two miles high."

"I understand just how you feel, Perk, but hold your horses a bit. Hurry is something we've got to fight shy of in this game of hide-and-seek with these dangerous smugglers of the gulf coast. As smart a group of men as we can ever claim to be, have bucked up against the gang and dropped out of the chase—more than a few of whom have disappeared mysteriously, and up at Headquarters it's believed they've met with foul play. This big Mex gulf hides a heap of secrets and has ever since old Blackbeard and that crowd of buccaneers used to sink Spanish galleons after looting them of their gold cargo and

sending hundreds of poor wretches to a watery grave."

"I'm wise to all them facts, partner," piped up Perk, grinning amiably, "an' I sure don't hanker after bein' sent down to that port o' missin' men in no hurry. I'll stick it out on this line jest as long as you say an' try to keep from grumblin'. Thar goes the last o' the rotten stuff overboard, Boss, an' we're all clear again. While we're a'waitin' till the last speck o' daylight slickers away, wouldn't it be right smart if we set our teeth in some o' that fine grub I laid in, to keep us from starvin' to death?"

"Suits me okay, buddy; suppose you trot it out and we'll pass the time away bolstering up our strength—no telling what we may have before us tonight if we happen to strike rich paydirt."

Accordingly they busied themselves with what to Perk especially was a most agreeable occupation, for it must be confessed that the Maine lad possessed a fairly good appetite while his capacity for storing away good things was something close to marvelous.

So the night settled down around them—sounds indicative of a Florida coast camping ground began to make themselves manifest—mullet jumped up out of the brackish water where some stream emptied its tide straight from

the Everglades into the gulf, to fall back again with resounding splashes. Now and then there was a rush, and a great deal of agitation of the water close to one of the mangrove islands, showing where some fierce piratical deep water fish was making an evening meal of the unlucky mullet—several wild ducks came spinning along from other shore places to settle further in where the reedy islands offered effectual shelter from night-raiding owls and hawks that could see in the dark.

"Gee whiz!" Perk was saying as he finished eating and started to put away what sandwiches and other stuff had been left over, "this sure must be a dandy place to do some shore shootin' an' if I hadn't other fish to fry I'd like to hang around a week'r so, takin' toll o' ducks, turkey, an' deer up on the mainland, with like as not a bobcat, or even a panther in the bargain!"

"All very fine for those who are down here sporting for sport, brother," Jack told him, "but our bunch has another kind of game to pull in and you've got to forget all this temptation so as to buckle down to business. Reckon it's time for us to be hopping off and getting that taste of cool, clean air a mile or so up. Shake a leg, buddy, and we'll shove off."

Jack, of course, had long since figured just what he meant to do when the moment arrived

to leave their hiding place and take to their wings again, so after their little anchor had been drawn out of the mud, carefully washed, and then stowed away where it would take little room and not be in the way, each of the occupants of the double cockpit set about carrying out their customary duties when a launching was in order.

"All set, Mister Pilot!" remarked Perk, finally, "give her the gun, boy!"

With only a fraction of the rush and roar usually connected with a start, the amphibian, with cut-out choked down, commenced to glide through the water of the partly enclosed bay, heading straight for the jaws of land beyond which lay the open and mighty gulf.

CHAPTER III

LIKE A NIGHT OWL ON THE WING

The rush and gurgle of the water parted by the pontoons beneath the fusilage of the plane was sounding most delightful to the ears of Perk as he sat there watching the jaws of land draw rapidly nearer.

Resting up was always a painful thing to Perk whose nerves called for action and had done so ever since he served in the flying corps across the Atlantic when men's souls thrilled with frequent contacts in the line of equally daring Hun war pilots.

Now they had shot past the twin points and were out upon the open gulf, their speed increasing ever second as Jack pulled the stick closer against his chest. Then the experienced pilot lifted her in a zoom that was simply magnificent, and they were off on their adventure at last.

Rising fast, the boat was soon at a good ceiling for flying. So too the night promised all manner of favorable things for men of their calling —up where they were the wind did not amount to much but it was blowing at quite a lively rate

closer to the earth and doubtless the broad palmetto leaves must be making a considerable slashing as they struck one another, dead and withered ones sawing like some giant violin bow.

This, with the wash of the waves upon the pebbled beach, would make enough noise to effectually deaden the whirr of the propeller—the new and novel muffler or silencer, fashioned very much on the order of such a contraption as successfully applied to small firearms, was doing wonderfully, and Perk every little while made motions as though shaking hands with himself because of this addition to their security, for under the usual conditions prevailing anything like secrecy in a noisy airship had been unknown to the sky detectives.

Perk had been under a strange hallucination when that other plane was soaring overhead—in fact he was once again back in the Argonne, with his boat hugging the earth, and an enemy swooping in circles overhead—he had even gone so far as to imagine the German war ace might be maneuvering so as to drop one of his bombs straight down on the stranded craft, with results that must spell a complete wipeout.

When they did not have their handy earphones in service Jack and his right bower had arranged a secret alphabet of signals, consisting of all manner of pokes and nudges, by means of

which they were enabled to communicate along professional lines at least. If it seemed necessary to Perk to ask questions not down on the brief list thus worked out, all he had to do was to adjust Jack's harness and then his own little outfit, enabling him to chatter away to his heart's content—and often to the annoyance of his less talkative chum.

But first of all he proceeded to make good use of the binoculars upon which so much depended. From side to side he would swing the glasses and search for anything that looked like a suspicious light on land or water then turn to what lay dead ahead.

In this region of the Ten Thousand Islands—all fashioned from the queer spreading mangrove that drops its long seeds so that they stick upright in the mud, and, quickly developing roots, spring up to add to the dimension of the original "island" there were never at any time many settlers so that the coast has been reckoned as the "loneliest ever," on which account Perk realized that if he should happen to glimpse a light, whether on land or gulf, the chances were fifty to one it must have some connection with the operations of the smuggler league.

Perk remembered how that Curtiss-Robin ship had finally disappeared in the haze lying to the north and from this he sucked more or less

consolation, since it seemed evident the location of their job must lie in that quarter toward which they were now bound like a great owl swooping on noiseless pinions to seize its prey.

A delicious thrill ran through his frame from time to time. If any one could "get a kick" from such a situation it was Perk, who was already visioning some sort of a battle royal when they struck the smuggling gang in the midst of their lawless work. The gang did their best to create a reign of terror.

Once far out toward the west, where rolled the tides of the broad gulf that stretched for a distance of five hundred miles across to the Coast of Mexico, he certainly did glimpse a light, low down on the horizon where just the faintest gleam of the late departed day still lingered. Ha! the mother ship no doubt, riding at anchor some miles out where the gulf was shallow and holding ground good — a heavily laden sailing craft, coming possibly from the Bahamas, and passing into the gulf between the Florida keys. Its captain knowing that the cargo they carried could be much more easily landed there than around Miami, where the Coast Guard was more vigilant.

Long and earnestly did Perk stare, picturing the shore motorboats speeding out through the gloom toward that signal light to take aboard

their several loads and make for certain secluded harbors where trucks would be waiting to transfor the illicit stuff to its destined markets where prices ranged high with the holidays approaching and rich, thirsty tourists to be supplied.

"Bang! it's gone blooie!" Perk suddenly told himself as he no longer found himself able to distinguish that suspicious gleam which had gradually grown dim and then utterly vanished from view. "Now, what in thunder does that mean I want to know—why should they douse the glim in such a hurry—wonder if they could have caught any sound from us to give 'em a scare? I'm in a tail-spin, seems like. Oh! shucks! mebee it was on'y a measly star after all, that's set back o' the horizon. Who got fooled that time, I want to know, Gabe Perkiser, you smarty?"

He took it humorously, happening to be one of those sensible lads capable of laughing, even when the joke was on himself.

Shortly afterwards Perk picked up what seemed to be a low-lying light, this time off toward the east, where he knew the land lay.

"Huh! I kinder guess that ain't a silly star," was the way he expressed his feelings as he continued to watch the glimmering object that rose and then grew dim, only to once more flash brightly. "Might be some squatter sittin' along-

side his campfire—mebbe a fishing camp, on'y I got an idea the light comes from a big lantern and not a blazing fire. Strikes me it oughter bear watchin' just the same."

A minute afterwards and he could no longer see the object of his concern.

"By jinks! what sort o' hocus-pocus might *that* be, I want to know — did somebody blow that light out just when I was hopin' big things might come from it, or was it only a bunch o' cabbage palms that come in between me an' the glow?"

It did not reappear, although Perk kept turning his glasses in that particular quarter time after time, as fresh hopes awakened.

The amphibian was running as smooth as silk, Perk told himself more than once—why not, when they had most carefully checked it over with scrupulous exactness, so as to be able to pronounce it in perfect condition. That new muffler did the work like magic and Perk really began to feel as though the efficiency of their aerial mount had been increased a hundred per cent by the installation of such an up-to-date contrivance, even if it did cut their speed down more or less—when they had good need of swift wings it could be done away with, since racket was powerless to hurt them then.

A few clouds had started up and were drifting

overhead by this time. Perk gave them several hasty looks, possibly wondering whether there could be any chance of a sudden blow arising since indeed they came from the southwest, where many of the rains and high winds had their brewing place, far out on the mighty gulf to be followed in turn by a "norther," cold and violent.

"That might be rotten luck for us," he grumbled, sensing trouble in putting Jack's scheme into operation, "but I guess there ain't anything to it—right cool even downstairs, I noticed an' they tell me it always heats up afore one o' these fall rains come along."

He put that matter out of his mind as hardly worthy of attention then a minute later he made another discovery. Again his attention was turned toward the west, for a light had appeared low down, a light that actually moved, this fact convincing the vigilant observer it could by no possibility be another setting star in the bright firmament above.

"That's the genuine stuff, or I'll eat my hat!" was his characteristic way of confirming this fresh discovery, and there was certainly a trace of triumph noticeable in his voice, as though this would wipe out his former blunder.

CHAPTER IV

THE DANCE OF THE FIRE-FLIES

Perk, now fully convinced that he had "struck oil," as he mentally termed it, laid the binoculars down on the front seat beside his pal and gave him certain nudges in his side, thereby telling him he, Perk, would take over the controls while the head pilot used the glasses.

When this had been accomplished Perk managed to point toward the west, so as to draw the attention of his mate thither without any waste of precious time.

Of course Jack immediately located the light and was watching it closely. He could easily make it out to be a lantern that must be on the deck of a vessel, since he discovered a mast and rigging near by, also the moving figures of several men.

The lantern did not remain stationary more than a few seconds at a time, but kept up a swinging movement that was eccentric to say the least, now passing back and forth like the weighty pendulum in an old-fashioned "grandfather" clock; then with an up-and-down action and, as

a windup performing a circular movement, repeated twice.

Of course Jack understood that those on board the smuggler must be trying to signal to those of their group who were on shore, the land workers of the hard-working bunch, which conclusion caused him to turn his attention in that quarter.

At first he was not rewarded by any discovery but not in the least discouraged he continued to wave his glasses back and forth, feeling certain those continuous signals from out on the gulf must be noticed and returned.

He chanced to be again watching the moving gleam when he felt Perk trying to gain his attention and when this had been accomplished pointing eagerly off to the east.

Yes, there it was as plain as anything—in fact there seemed to be two separate lights looking like twin stars and even as Jack watched he saw them carry on in a most remarkable fashion. Now one would be in violent motion, perhaps doing some intricate figure that had a meaning; then the other would join in, with the pair swinging back and forth, crossing each other's path, and going through the most wonderful evolutions.

To Jack's mind they looked like a pair of gigantic fireflies gone loco with excitement and carrying on in the most astonishing manner. In-

deed, he could easily picture it as a wild dance of make-believe insects on a greatly magnified scale.

Of course Jack never had the slightest doubt as to what all this mystifying activity must be—the two extremes of the smuggling fraternity were exchanging signals—each and every movement had a meaning of its own and conveyed such information as was most valuable to the business in hand — in Jack's mind it was as though the conversation might be running something after this fashion:

"Well, here we are on hand according to promise, with a full cargo of the finest wet stuff you ever had drop down on your coast. How does the land lie over there?"

"Coast all clear—we will start the fleet out to lighten your cargo right away—keep the beacon burning so they'll make a straight line to your anchorage, which will mean a saving of time."

"We get your meaning — glad you are so prompt to send back word — come right along and get your invoice — the more the merrier, boys. Wind getting rougher, and we ought to be off this shallow shore before it swings around any more. Don't hold back—Merry Christmas to you all, boys!"

Perk on his part was also trying to keep tabs on all that was going on, not neglecting his duties

with the controls, it can be set down as certain. He twisted his neck and cast swift glances first to the right and then in the opposite direction, fascinated by that flashing beacon conversation.

"By gum! if they ain't holdin' a regular confab with them lights," Perk was telling himself, delighted with his opportunity to witness such a proceeding, knowing as he did what this all meant to himself and Jack. "That guy on shore is sure some punkins about this signal layout—works jest like a Boy Scout might, sending a message across to another o' the troop standin' on top o' a high peak—makes me think I'm back on the front, with Signal Corps men wigwaggin' for all that's out. Huh! There goes them twin lights, showin' the chinnin' must be over with both sides posted on the program. Say, ain't this the boss job though? I guess I never did get half as much fun outen any game I tackled before."

Just then Jack signalled that he wished to handle the stick once more, which the other was indeed not sorry for, since it began to look as though they were close to a critical moment when considerable skill would be required in manipulating the ship so as to accomplish their ends without unduly alarming those they spied upon.

Already they had managed to collect a certain amount of valuable facts which were only

guessed a tpreviously, so cleverly had these transfer bases been kept concealed from the most skillful of the Government agents. Perk himself felt confident that they were as yet only on the threshold of still more important discoveries.

It was one of Perk's peculiar little eccentricities that he could do better thinking if only he had a bit of chewing gum between his teeth, just to keep some muscles at work, he said, and in some mysterious fashion having this energy pass from his working jaws to his brain and hasten its activities.

So what did he do now but fumble in a pocket of his oily dungarees and produce a slab of his favorite brand, Perk thrusting it into his mouth and savagely rolling it between his teeth, really believed this helped his brain to function more easily.

Perhaps it may have done so—some people have all manner of strange hallucinations, which, being favored, bring satisfaction to their train of thought. If Perk actually believed in his remedy that was half the battle and no other person's business whatsoever.

Looking out to sea he could still find that lone beacon, even without the aid of his binoculars. It was easy for such an imaginative fellow to picture in his mind the lingering sloop, loaded to the gunwales with case goods, worth almost a

millionaire's ransom — the dark sailors from Bimimi lolling around on deck, ready to up-sail and flee should the slightest sign of a Coast Guard raid make itself manifest. From off toward the distant shore line there came dully to their listening ears the repeated throb of one or more speed boats hastening to lay alongside and transfer their pre-arranged quota of cases, after which the burden of getting the illicit cargo safely landed would rest on the shoulders of those who manned the smaller smuggler craft.

It was a beautiful little game, Perk was assuring himself, when he realized how everything had been arranged to make things work as though greased. As the isolated places along the gulf coast were without number and the enforcement agents woefully pressed to even half cover their allotted territory, the reason for the few arrests that had rewarded the most strenuous efforts on the part of the Coast Guard could be easily comprehended.

"And that's just why they picked out Jack, out of all the boys in the service, loaded him up with this here amphibian crate that c'n drop down on land or water, it don't matter a darn which, got him a sort o' side partner to help make things go and turned him loose to pull in the net. Huh! we'll know before long just what this racket is goin' to wind up in, for we've made our first

move, our hat's thrown into the ring, and we'll either make Pike's Peak, or—bust!"

Presently Perk began to convince himself he could at times pick up the throbbing sound of a humming motor, undoubtedly one of those on their way out to the supply boat off shore some miles and ready to deliver such number of high-priced cases as the lists called for.

Yes, when the night wind veered or shifted a bit he was absolutely certain about picking up the chug-chug-chug that betrayed the presence of the leading speed boat.

About this time Perk noticed two separate things that had a bearing on their mission—the first was that for some reason they no longer romped along at their earlier speed, showing that the pilot had seen fit to slacken his craft to a considerable degree, though keeping up steerage way. The second thing that struck Perk was the fact that they were slowly but surely making a decided swing off to the west, which if continued would make their immediate course a complete circle.

"Go to it, old hoss!" he was saying, just as if he expected the other to hear every word which was out of the question with that whirring propeller keeping up its low, sing-song tone. "You got 'em beat a mile when it comes to playin' safe, that's right. Don't want to rile the water an' let

everybody in on the fact that we're hangin' around here, waitin' for somethin' to turn up. 'Sides, it ain't good policy to make the ten-strike till they got the stuff on board the chuggin' speed boat."

He was intensely interested in Jack's play for time and listened with his heart almost up in his throat, fearing lest the steady chugging should suddenly stop and the game be thrown by default. But no, it was keeping on in perfect rhythm, sounding in Perk's ear something like the tattoo of a machine gun in action and sending out its swarm of leaden missiles—a sound that had long ago become so familiar to his ears as never to be forgotten, despite the lapse of time.

Surely by now that leading boat must be getting close to the schooner so that the transfer would soon be an accomplished fact, after which the return trip was due to be started which was when they meant to break into the game.

"Ginger pop! if I don't ketch the grumble o' a second tug further away, and I guess now a consid'able bigger craft than the leadin' one. Get a move on, fellers—the dinner gong's struck and the grub's on the table waitin' to be swallered—first come, first served's the rule things go by, so stir your stumps, an' put in the best licks you know how—an' may the devil take the hindmost. Hey there! that drummin' noise, it's stopped—

wonder if they got out to the sloop or else smell a rat an' are lyin' low till they make it a dead certainty? Gosh, but ain't this all mighty thrillin' though, and how it does tickle me most to death," muttering which Perk, still listening, actually held his breath the better to catch any sound from below.

CHAPTER V.

A BATTLE ROYAL

Jack, being desirous of ascertaining just what was taking place over where the sloop laden with contraband was anchored, did his best glide or coast, a feature at which he was most competent.

When the engine ceased to function and the whizzing propeller lost much of its dizzy momentum, both he and Perk strained their ears so as to catch any sound calculated to inform them as to what was going on.

The trick proved worth while, for plainly they could make out human voices; also a certain rumbling sound that Jack imagined might be caused by the rush back and forth of a small hand truck on which cases of imported liquid refreshment were loaded.

This told the story to the effect that the speed launch must have reached the schooner and was lying alongside with its intended cargo being delivered with no loss of time. Probably, if everything went with machine-like precision, the speed boat would soon be fully laden and started back toward some secret haven where big motor trucks

would be waiting to transport the cargo to Tampa, St. Petersburg, or some other city to the north.

Meanwhile the second boat was due around that time—they could hear her hoarse exhaust as she bucked the billows rolling in toward the shore line and a moving light about half a mile distant betrayed her position.

If one thing tickled Perk more than another just then it was the realization that he and Jack held aces in the game—their possession of that almost priceless muffler, by means of which they could approach fairly close without the working motor betraying their coming, gave them an enormous advantage.

"We sure have got the upper hand in this tangle," Perk was telling himself in great glee as he listened to the chugging of the second transfer boat. "Huh! I kinder guess them guys been sleepin' at the switch not to savvy what a bully thing one o' these here silencers'd be to the smugglin' game. Looks like it might be a walk-over for our team, if the luck on'y holds good."

Jack had about decided on his course of action. He did not mean that either of those boats should get safely ashore with their loads, if he had anything to say about it, and he reckoned he had.

Still, it was not politic to be too quick on the trigger—they could just continue to hang around

and be ready to pounce down on their intended prey after the fashion of a hungry eagle striking a fat duck that had been selected out of the flock on the feeding grounds.

One thing he did do was to cut his intended wide circle short and again head toward the scene of action, a move that certainly afforded the eager Perk more or less satisfaction, he being thrilled with the expectation of breaking into the game without much more loss of time.

But you never can tell just what may happen when rival forces are striving against one another. The best laid plans often go wrong and there was always a chance of the unexpected happening.

Hardly had the airship whipped around again so as to head into the north than Perk became aware of the fact that there was a sudden accession of weird noises springing up from the goal toward which they were now aiming. Jack, too, must have caught the increased volume, for he sheered off as if to hold back a bit so as to grasp the meaning of the new racket.

Men were no longer simply talking or laughing as they so cheerfully labored in transferring some of the contraband from the sloop to the deck of the speedboat—their voices were raised to shouts in which surprise, even the element of near-panic, could be detected.

Then came a flash, succeeded by a sharp report, undoubtedly standing for the discharge of some species of firearm! Others of a similar character immediately followed until there were all the elements of a genuine rough and tumble fight discernible in the growing confusion and uproar.

Perk was astounded by such unaccountable goings-on. Whatever could possess these smugglers to start a fight among themselves, when such a disturbance was likely to be heard by any Coast Guard boat that might happen to be cruising within ten miles of the spot and bring down all manner of serious trouble on their heads, certainly breaking up the fine combination that had been effected for that especial delivery?

"Holy smoke! they sure must a'gone looney!" Perk was telling himself, lost in wonder and dismay, for he began to suspect that this would be apt to mix their own plans and upset all Jack's calculations.

It would seem to be the only explanation possible — that some of the case goods had been tampered with, the result being that the willing workers were not only hilarious, but ready to start a rough house then and there on the deck of the schooner.

Then suddenly remembering how both he and Jack had their head-phone harness attached, and

could thus exchange words when they pleased, Perk broke loose in his usual impulsive fashion, seeking the light which he somehow had reason to believe his chum could give him.

"Gee whiz! partner, what's broke loose, would you say?" he demanded. "Them guys act like they'd been tryin' out the high power stuff they fetched all the way from the Bahamas. Danged if it don't sound to me like a reg'lar old Irish Tipperary Fair fight—listen to 'em shootin' things up to beat the band! Say, if they keep agoin' like that, they'll smash every case they got an' we won't find any evidence to grab. Got a line on the racket, old hoss?"

"It's a fight, and a lively one at that," admitted the pilot, "but I reckon you're away off when you figure it's a ruction between those on the schooner and the boys of that speedboat."

"You got me guessin' partner," said the puzzled Perk; "then who's mixed up in the shindy, I want to know?"

"Sounds a whole lot like hijackers to me, Perk."

"Ginger pop! Is *that* what it means then, Jack—some tough guys been out there on the gulf keepin' a close watch on the schooner that came up the coast loaded to the gun'ls with case goods, an' crept in with small boats to make a big haul! Listen to 'em squabble, will you, boy?

What wouldn't I give for daylight so's to see that boss shindy—shootin' keeps a'goin' on like the old days over there—wow! They must be a bunch o' rotten marksmen, or the whole lot'd be wiped out afore this time. What're we a'goin' to do 'bout it, Jack—we ought to have some say what's to be done with all that stuff—no use bein' eagles o' the skies if we gotter stick around an' let a measly set o' hawks get away with the game."

"Don't worry, that's what we're *not* aiming to do!" snapped Jack, as he banked, and once again headed in the direction of the spot where all that wild commotion was taking place.

"I get you, boy—the machine gun, is it?" barked Perk, starting up from his seat as though to make ready.

Before he could throw off his head-harness Jack stopped him.

"Wait—you got me wrong—let the gun lie where it is. You know we never expect to use it unless our lives are in danger. Get the bombs, Perk—the simple tear bombs—they ought to fill the bill!"

Perk evidently not only understood now but was fully in sympathy with the scheme Jack had hatched out under the spur of necessity—quick thinking was one of young Ralston's strong points and his cleverness along those lines had served

him wonderfully on more than a few previous occasions, where the situation looked desperate.

They were sliding down a steep glide with the engine shut off. The deck of the nearby schooner was plainly visible due to the lights aboard, and the successive discharges of firearms, each looked like a miniature flash of lightning. As they approached the scene of confusion the racket grew in volume,—a dozen men seemed to be whooping things up as though under the impression that the battle could be won by sheer noise—and broken heads.

Perk kept his wits, and managed to locate the small stock of tear bombs that had been given into their charge, with the idea they might find them more or less useful should they strike a superior force of reckless law breakers and get into what Perk would call a "jam."

Already he had succeeded in clutching a couple of the round missiles that were charged with the acrid gas that could play such havoc with human eyes as to render the strongest men as weak as babes and settled down in a position where he could throw them to advantage.

CHAPTER VI

THE TEAR-BOMB ATTACK

It was certainly a thrilling moment for Perk as he crouched there in his awkward cubicle back of the pilot and waited for the proper second to arrive when his accuracy at throwing the bombs would be tested.

Jack meanwhile had his hands full attending to his part of the business—it was of course of prime importance that they should drop down as close to the deck of the schooner as possible so the full effect of the bursting tear-bombs might be felt by those struggling smugglers and hi-jackers, but there was the mast of the cruising vessel to bear in mind since it towers many feet in the air.

To strike this spar would entail danger of a crash, or having their landing-gear torn away, which would prove a disaster. Consequently Jack held himself in readiness to once more start his engine when sufficiently near the object of his attack.

Perk knew just when their downward velocity terminated, for not only were they again on a

level keel, but the motor commenced working with its customary intensity and the whole fusilage quivered as usual when they were under way.

All this had consumed mere fragments of a minute and Perk had already drawn back his hand to make ready for his first toss. It was his intention to follow this up with a second bomb, hurled in double-quick order, for a dual fire would make the results more complete.

Jack left it completely to his comrade to decide just when to let fly, relying on the lessons Perk had taken along those lines in order to make himself as near perfect as possible. If it so chanced that their initial attack turned out to be futile, it was always possible for the fighting airship to swing around so as to permit a second attempt.

Much would depend on just how those who were struggling like mad wolves on the deck of the schooner to gain or retain possession of the spoils took the attack from the air. Jack rather fancied they would be panic stricken at having a grim spectre of the skies descend on them like a plunging eagle and before they could possibly recover sufficient energy to strike back, the monster roc must have winged past, and the pungent gas started to affect their eyes, rendering them frantic with a threatened temporary blindness.

Then Perk began his share of the vicious attack. He followed out his prearranged programme with machine-like movements, sending his first bomb with such cleverness that it struck close to the stern, for Jack had made his hawk-like swoop so as to pass completely along the entire length of the deck—this in order to give his working pal a better chance to fulfill his assignment.

Even before that missile struck, Perk had instantly changed the other bomb to his eager right hand and in a rapid-fire way sent it, too, hurtling downward, to crash further on close to the bow.

Then they were speeding into space beyond the bowsprit of the anchored rum-runner, with Jack starting to climb in order to bank and swing around, so as to complete the job if his first endeavor lacked in any detail.

Lucky indeed for the two aviators that they had their goggles on, else they too might have suffered from the fumes that so quickly spread in every direction as though fanned by the night breeze. Perk afterwards admitted that he had caught a whiff of the penetrating gas despite the covering helmet and close-fitting goggles but thanks to the haste with which Jack carried their ship past, the gas had little or no effect.

The clamor still continued, if anything, redoubled, for now the element of fear had gripped

the hearts of every man on board both boats as they felt that terrible, unseen agency stabbing at their eyes and making the stoutest writhe with agony and alarm, thinking they must be doomed.

Jack could easily comprehend why they should be demoralized under the prevailing conditions—there had been enough excitement in the air to start with when the hijacker crowd boarded the rum-runner and joined issues with the crews of the two allied boats but when from out of the skies there descended a swooping monster, apparently about to fall upon them as might a stray meteor from unlimited space in the firmament, and that strange, racking pain gripped their eyes, nothing but panic could describe their condition with any degree of accuracy.

But one element was now lacking in the dreadful turmoil—Perk could no longer detect the quick percussion of blows, as fists and clubbed firearms clashed against human bodies backed by a fierce anger that had been fanned into a blaze by injuries received and a sense of impending victory, with the spoils in sight.

Apparently every man among them was thinking of nothing save his own individual sufferings and terror—unable to see with any degree of certainty, they must be staggering this way and that, colliding with each other and then one by one either falling into the water or else jumping

aboard the speedboat so conveniently nearby.

Jack had by this time brought the ship around again so as to head into the wind as before. Perk, divining that this meant a second slash at the mob on the sloop's deck reached out for another relay of missiles. Now that he had got started he was in prime condition to "keep the ball rolling" until there did not remain a single hijacker or smuggler aboard the rum-runner.

But Jack, more inclined to pity than the former war ace, did not make that second dip—he had a good idea the punishment thus dealt out with their initial swoop would be severe enough to clear the deck and set the late rival forces to quitting the vicinity of the ill smelling sloop with the utmost speed, regardless of the means employed to accomplish such a retreat while the going held good.

Perk could hear splash after splash, as though the frenzied sufferers in their agony had been seized with the possibility of cooling water being a sovereign remedy for the ills that had so suddenly gripped their aching eyeballs.

Perk was chuckling to himself, even as he continued to crouch there, and held a third tear bomb ready for instant use when Jack was pleased to give him a fitting opportunity to throw it.

"Zowie!" he was telling himself, "if that don't

make me think o' the times when us boys lined up on a dock and made the dive, one right after another—plunk—plunk—plunk! Go to it, you terriers—swim for the shore, boys, and good luck to you all. Our job'll be to pick up the rum-boat with her juicy cargo, an' hand her over to some Government official Jack knows about around these diggings. High—low—Jack an' the smugglin' game—that spells the hull thing I kinder guess!"

Perk was by no means so lacking in sagacity not to understand just why his comrade was hanging fire and keeping at a respectful distance from the sloop. He wished sufficient time to elapse so that most of the penetrating gas from the tear bombs would be carried off on the night wind and it might be reckoned safe for them to go aboard.

He could vision the terrified hijackers after their speedy plunge overboard managing to find their several boats and dragging themselves over the gunwales with but one thought in their bewildered minds, and that to put as much distance between themselves and the rum-runner as possible.

He even told himself he could catch the sound of splashing and oars working madly in the locks, although this may have been only imagination on Perk's part, but for one thing, he did glimpse a

moving light and could detect a chugging movement such as would accompany the inglorious flight of the speedboat, racing for some shore harbor.

Silence followed, as though all the human elements in that late wild tumult had managed to leave the scene of their defeat. Still Jack continued to swing around in a short circle, showing how even with the spoils of victory close within their reach he could keep to his standard maxim of "watch your step!"

Minutes passed, and it went without question that the penetrating gas must be well swept away by the night wind so that it would be safe for them to board their prize and take a quick inventory of the illicit cargo.

Perk knew the time for action had arrived when he felt the plane head toward the surface of the gulf, as though it was Jack's intention to drop just back of the sloop's stern when they could taxi alongside and readily climb to the low deck.

There was nothing surprising about their coming in contact with the surface of the water—Jack had acquired a habit of making perfect landings whether ashore or with pontoons. Knowing this, Perk never looked for anything else.

They came down with hardly any more of a

splash than a pelican might have made and almost instantly Jack started taxiing ahead in the direction of the nearby anchored sloop.

Perk had set the third tear-bomb down with the belief that there would be no necessity for his using it. Silence hung about the sloop, and he had decided there could be no one around, unless, when they clambered over the side, they should discover some poor chap who had succumbed to the provoking gas or else been stunned by a blow in the wild melee that had raged previously.

Just the same wise old Perk did not mean to be caught off his guard and so he dragged out a formidable looking automatic, supplied by the Secret Service to all its accredited agents as a means for compelling a surrender on the part of any "wanted man" when overtaken in his flight.

The head-phones had been disconnected so there was nothing to hinder a prompt boarding of the captured boat when Jack gave the word. With the glorious flush of victory thrilling his whole frame Perk stood by to fend off as they drew close to the squatty stern. It would be his duty to clamber out on one wing and get aboard, carrying a rope by means of which the floating airship could be secured to the water craft.

This he managed to accomplish without much

difficulty, wondering while so doing whether he and Jack might not be making history, for he suspected that never before in the annals of aviation had an amphibian plane been afforded a chance to take a prize of war in such an original fashion as bombarding the enemy crew with tear-gas bombs and causing them to flee in mad haste.

It was an exultant Perk who stood erect on the deck and waved his flying helmet with the proud air of a neophyte hunter planting his foot on the body of his first slain lion or tiger.

CHAPTER VII

A WHITE ELEPHANT ON THEIR HANDS

"Come on in, Jack old hoss, the water's fine!" was the way Perk greeted his chum after gaining the deck of the captured rum runner.

"First make that rope fast somehow so we'll run no risk of losing our floating crate," Jack advised him.

"Yeah, that's just what I'm goin' to do, buddy," continued the other, as he proceeded to make fast to the sloop's wheel after which Jack managed to clamber aboard.

There were lanterns scattered around, and in the haste with which the afflicted crew had abandoned their ship no one had bothered about extinguishing them. By means of the meagre illumination afforded by them, the two airmen were able to take a fairly comprehensive survey of their surroundings.

"Huh! I kinder guessed we'd find a bunch o' the scrappin' critters stretched out, an' lookin' all bloody like," ventured Perk, with possibly a shadow of regret in his voice and manner, "but shucks! never a one do I set my lamps on. Here's

a case or two o' wet goods been busted open, seems like, in all that kickup an' mebbe now some o' the wild boys got a taste that helped keep 'em in the roarin', tearin' fight they had but looks as if every man must a' been mighty keen on jumpin' his bail. Wow! I can't blame 'em any, if the way my eyes feel is a fair sample o' what they got served out to 'em!"

"You said it, partner," echoed Jack, "but keep from rubbing it in, if you know what's good for you. The gas is being carried away right along by the breeze, so let's forget it and take a look around."

"Let's," echoed Perk, always more or less curious and eager to "peek" when the chance offered.

It seemed as though they were alone on the anchored sloop that was rising and falling on the long rollers coming in off the wide gulf. Piles of cases lay on the deck around them, ready to be transferred to such smaller craft as were expected to draw alongside with orders for them from some mysterious central clearing house. Possibly there were many more similar packages down below, for the sloop was evidently heavily laden.

Now and then the voluble member of the firm would let out a crisp exclamation as though those keen eyes of his had run across some visible

sign of the recent rough-house disagreement that tickled him more or less.

"We sure broke in on a sweet little party all right, Jack," he observed, at one time with a chuckle, "see, here's a broken bottle that I guess must a' been smashed on some poor guy's bean and from the blood spots hereabout he had a plenty, but still he managed to skip out when the grand march started. An' looky what I found—a coat that's tore into shreds. Gee whiz! but that was some hot tamale scrap, believe me. I'd give somethin' for a chance to look in on the round."

Jack was apparently puzzling his own head over something that did not hit him as so very humorous.

"Yes," he told Perk, with a grimace, "we've made a bully apture all right, partner, but when you come to think twise it may be we've got a white elephant on our hands after all."

"Huh! what dye mean by sayin' that, old pal?" questioned the other, who apparently saw nothing in the affair calculated to create any tendency toward dismay in his mind. "You got me in a tail spin, partner—lift the lid, won't you, an' gimme a look in?"

"Well, we've got the rumboat okay, haven't we?"demanded Jack.

"Looks thataways, I guess," Perk admitted.

"Just so, and what d'ye reckon we're going to do with it?" continued the head pilot, hitting straight from the shoulder as usual.

"Why—er—ginger pop! that's so, old hoss, *what?* Mebbe now the shoe's on the other foot, an' it's the blamed sloop that's got us held up. Would it be proper to set the bally boat afire and see all this hot stuff go up in flames? or we might knock a hole in the bottom, an' sink her right where she stands, though that might get us in Dutch with our people, since the rum runners could come around an' salvage this case stuff again. Only way to settle the puzzle'd be for us to have a bargain day sale, opening case after case, knockin' the neck off each and every bottle and makin' all the fish in this corner o' the gulf dizzy with a mixture o' rum an' seawater."

Jack laughed at hearing all this wild stuff come from the bewildered Perk.

"Strikes me I'm not going to get much satisfaction from you, partner," he bluntly told the other. "Our folks expect to see some evidence to prove the big yarn we're bound to tell—about our dropping those tear bombs and scattering the fighting hijackers and rum-runners and all that stuff which means that by hook or by crook we've just *got* to get clear with this sloop and all the contraband that's aboard—hand it over to some of Uncle Sam's agents along the gulf coast,

whose addresses I was given before leaving Washington, to be used in just such circumstances as these. So try again, and see if you can suggest some way it can be put through."

Thereupon Perk started scratching his tousled head in a fashion he always followed when given a problem to solve, since his wits were apt to be a bit rusty and in need of oiling so as to cause them to function properly.

"Wouldn't that jar you?" he finally exploded, "we jest can't load our crate with the bally stuff, 'cause it couldn't lift a tenth o' the cargo we grabbed so easy like. An' as to towin' the sloop after us by a hawser, it'd be too much like a caterpiller creepin' along. I own up it's got me buffaloed, Jack, an' if anything's goin' to be done it's bound to come out o' your own coco."

"No hurry at all, brother," the other told him, little chance of those lads making back this way in a hurry, since they got the scare of their lives tonight. Let's look around some more and possibly a suggestion will pop up to give us the glad hand and see us out of the mire."

"Suits me okay old hoss," agreed Perk, nodding his head confidently as though he had known all along that such a clever partner as Jack would have a spare card up his sleeve to play when things began to look unusually gloomy.

Perk picked up one of the lanterns, for he knew they would need some sort of illumination if they intended to explore the regions below deck which he termed the "hold," not being much of a sea-going man, although capable of filling quite a number of different callings from engineer to air pilot.

He had not taken half a dozen steps after descending the short flight of steps leading below when he came to a sudden halt.

"Glory be! what was that?—sounded real like a groan, Jack!" he exclaimed, trying to peer into the gloom of the hold, where there seemed to be row after row of the same type of wooden cases with foreign inscriptions burned on them.

"Just what it was, Perk," agreed his chum, pressing close behind the holder of the lantern, "lift the light a bit, I think I can make out something stretched out flat—yes, it must be a man, I'm certain."

"Kinder guessed we'd run across one or two o' the scrappers knocked out an' left behind in the getaway rush," commented Perk who had drawn his automatic before starting to explore the lower regions of the rum-runner, not knowing what they were apt to meet there.

He continued to advance, and presently they were bending over a dismal looking object, undoubtedly a man who might be a member of the

crew, judging from his rough sea clothes and his bare feet.

There could be no question but that he had been in the fight, since his face was bloody and his general appearance betokened rough treatment. Undoubtedly he had been senseless at the time the tear-gas penetrated every part of the small vessel, and was only now coming to.

Jack lost no time in examining the pitiful looking object while Perk waited to hear what his verdict would be. After all the old fighter bore no malice toward any of these reckless men who were so assiduously engaged in breaking the law of the land by running contraband goods into Uncle Sam's domains and he was just as willing to bind up the wounds of this luckless adventurer as if the other had only been an ordinary sailor in sore trouble.

"Nothing serious, it seems," was Jack's decision, he has had a pretty hard knock that started the blood from his nose and as like as not laid him out here senseless for there's a fine big lump on his head."

"So we'll have *one* prisoner to fetch in after all," chorteled Perk, as if pleased by the prospect of being able to produce a witness to testify to the work they had just accomplished.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPOILS OF VICTORY

"Take hold, Perk," continued Jack, without losing any time. "We've got to get this poor chap out in the open air for it's pretty bad down below here, and bothers my eyes more or less."

So between them they managed to carry the wounded rum-runner to the deck, where he was laid down, still groaning, although showing no other signs of life.

"Step lively, brother, and see if you can run across any fresh water, so's to pour a little down his throat," Jack went on to say. "I can dip up some salty stuff by reaching down over the gun'l and mop his forehead so's to fetch him around."

"Okay, boss!" snapped the ever ready Perk, "kinder guess I spied a barrel with a faucet — hope now she don't hold spirits instead o' water. Watch my smoke, that's all."

He was indeed back in what he would term a "jiffy," bearing a battered and rusty tin kettle in his hand which proved to contain something that might, with reservations, be called "drinking" water though it proved to be lukewarm and pos-

sibly full of "wigglers," as the larvae of mosquitoes are called.

Jack raised the man's head, which he had succeeding in washing to some extent, and forcing open his mouth allowed some of the contents of the pannikin to drain down his throat.

This set him to coughing and so he came to, showing all the signs of bewilderment that might be expected after going to sleep in the midst of a most clamorous battle with the reckless hijackers, and now waking up to find strange faces bending over him, heads that were encased in close-fitting helmets and the staring goggles of airmen.

"You're all right, brother," Jack assured the man, on seeing how alarmed he appeared to be. "Your crew skipped out and deserted you, but we'll stand by. Consider yourself a prisoner of Uncle Sam, although you'll not be punished any to speak of if only you open up and tell all you know about the owners and the skipper of this smuggler craft. What's her name and where are you from?"

The man had by this time recovered sufficiently to understand what was required of him. Jack's manner was reassuring, and he came out of his half panic so as to make quite a civil reply to the questions asked.

So they learned that the sloop had been known

as the *Cicade,* which Jack knew to mean a locust and that her home port was in the Bahamas, hotbed of the smuggler league, Bimini, in fact, being its chief port of departure.

"What're we goin' to do with this chap?" Perk was asking. "We don't want him to give us the slip, since he's the on'y prisoner we got, do we, partner?"

"I reckon not, brother, and to make certain that doesn't happen we'll have to tie him up or fasten him to the mast here while we finish looking around. I hope to run across the ship's papers, if they've got any such things aboard."

"Leave that to me, Jack, I'm some punkins when it comes to splicin' up a prisoner o' war, so he can't break away." Perk proved himself a man of his word by securing a piece of rope, wrapping it several times around the ankles of the seaman, and finishing with a succession of hard knots such as would require the services of a sharp knife blade when it came time to liberate the captive.

The man was a pretty tough looking customer, thanks to the treatment he had met with in the merry time the rival parties had had aboard the sloop, but at least he knew when he was well off and something in Jack's manner as well as his voice told him these strangers would go easy

with him if only he gave them as little trouble as possible.

So once again the pair set out to finish their exploration of the object of their latest "strafing" feat when a battle had been brought to an abrupt close with all hands in full flight simply by a dextrous movement of Perk's arm and the tossing of a couple of innocent looking tear-bombs into the midst of the warring factions.

This time it was Jack who made the discovery. Perk saw him step over, while they were still on deck, and lift a ragged tarpaulin that seemed to cover some bulky object toward the stern of the sloop. After that one look Jack gave the well worn covering a hitch and a toss that sent it flying revealing something that caused Perk's eyes to stick out with astonishment, not mentioning a sudden spasm of delight.

"Wow! what's this I'm seein' partner?" he yelped joyously. "A reg'lar engine or I'm a crocodile from the Nile! Why, this must be what they call an auxiliary craft, fitted to use canvas or hoss power, whichever fills the bill best. You c'n ditch me if this ain't what I'll call luck. An' heaps of it."

"I had a sneaking suspicion we'd run across something like this," confessed Jack, who nevertheless seemed just as well pleased as his comrade over the find. "It's taking too big a chance

to ship a cargo as rich as this one in a tub like this with only rotten sails to speed the craft if she happened to run afoul of a revenue cutter or one of those new sub-chasers the Coast Guard's been fitted out with. And now the problem's been solved, just as we hoped it would be."

"Meanin' we c'n get somewhere without tryin' to tow the rumboat behind our crate, and making a long and tiresome job o' it, eh what, partner?" Perk suggested, with considerable animation.

"Take a look at this engine, Perk, and tell me if you reckon you could run the thing if it became necessary."

Accordingly the other investigated and it was not long before he ventured to give his decision.

"Seems okay to me, Boss. Course I can't jest say for sure till I tries it out, but the chances are three to one she'll work for me."

"We'll soon have a chance to put that to the test, for it's our only way to hang on to our spoils and have something to turn in for the night's work."

"I'm laughin' to see how things keep happenin' jest to suit our crowd, old hoss," Perk went on to remark, still chuckling at a great rate. "Do we tow the ship behind the sloop, partner?"

"Not that you could notice," he was informed. "I aim to have you stick to the rummy, while I

get up a thousand feet or so and kind of play the part of an aerial scout, just like you've told me you used to do when you were running one of those war sausages, known as blimps in these up-to-date times. No objections, have you, Perk?"

"What, me? I should guess not," the other exploded. "Why, it'll be jest a rummy time with this kid, runnin' off with the old sloop and a prisoner on board to boot. I'm tickled pink to know we're right in action at last, after waitin' so long, an' ding-dongin' around till we both got stale. But how 'bout draggin' that ere mudhook up off the ground—think we c'n tackle the job between us, Jack?"

"Oh! That can be put through without much trouble, I reckon," Perk was assured by the confident one. "I think if you investigate you'll find they've got some sort of winch, a bit like the old fashioned windlass we used to wind up whenever we pulled the old oaken bucket up from the country well. Let's take a peek and make sure."

It took them but a minute to have Jack's guess verified, for there was a winch, with the rope of the anchor attached; all that would be necessary was to start winding and by main strength the anchor must be haulded out of the mud and lifted to the vessel's bow, there to hang until needed again.

"No use of our stickin' 'round these diggin's

any longer, partner," Perk suggested. "The canvas is all clewed up or reefed, whatever they call it, so we won't have it flappin' around after the ship gets under way. Say the word, Boss, an' leave the rest to me."

"But nothing has been said as to what port we're meaning to strike out for," observed Jack, and that's a matter of considerable importance. First of all it would be apt to queer our business some if we sailed openly into Tampa, St. Petersburg, or even Key West; for some of those smart newspaper reporters would be bound to get on to the facts and like as not we'd have our pictures printed in all the papers. A fat chance we'd stand to do any more work ripping this contraband conspiracy up the back, after *they* got through telling things."

"Well, I guess now that would queer our game, wouldn't it, partner?" bleated the annoyed Perk, then brightening up as he eyed his chum in a suggestive fashion as though anticipating further interesting remarks along that particular line, he went on to add: "S'pose I'm let into the plan I know you've got all fixed up for us to foller."

"All things considered," began Jack, thus urged, "I reckon it would be the best scheme if we managed to get the rum-runner anchored back in that big bunch of mangrove islands on

the outer edge of which we lay low with our crate so nicely camouflaged. For that matter we could cover the deck the same way, since it'll be from the air most likely the danger is bound to come—through Oscar Gleeb, the German ex-war pilot."

"Sounds good to me, buddy!" snapped Perk, grinning.

"I'll swing around overhead, and have my eye peeled for any sign of trouble," continued Jack, "and also keep tabs on you while on the trip south. Of course we don't know just what speed you can coax out of that rusty old engine, but even at a minimum of six or eight miles per hour, we surely ought to get in hiding before sun-up."

"Easy enough, Boss, and mebbe long before," Perk agreed. "Didn't you get the far away grumble of a marine engine working just when we climbed aboard this junk—I didn't say anything at the time, but I guessed as how it might be that second tub turnin' tail an' puttin' for the shore."

"I made up my mind that was what it stood for," Jack told his companion. "They listened to all that terrible racket and just made up their minds it was too hot out this way for them to make the riffle. Oh, well! two may be company, but three's considered a crowd and we might

have found we'd bitten off more than we could chew, so what does it matter?

"We've gathered in the booze," Perk was saying proudly, "or most of it anyway, together with the rum-runner, and one o' the crew to turn State's evidence, so what else could we wish for —I for one don't feel greedy. Plenty more where this one came from, and the smuggling season is long. What we got to pay most attention to is liftin' the lid, so's to find out just who the big guns are, backing this racket an' chances are we're on the right road to doin' that this very minute."

"That's correct, Perk, but let's get a move on and be going."

CHAPTER IX

ENGINEER PERK ON DECK

Everything else being in readiness Jack and his muscular comrade started to work the deck winch in order to get the anchor "apeak," as Perk called it, being desirous of showing off with his limited knowledge of things nautical.

"She's amovin' okay, old hoss!" gasped Perk who had been doing considerable straining, anxious to display his ability as a mudhook lifter. "A few more good pulls an' we'll have the old gink where we want it."

The task being completed, the sloop began to move backward, very much like those fiddler crabs Perk had watched retreating before his attack on one of the sandy Florida beaches.

"Looks like I'd better go aboard our ship and get away from here before anything happens to disable a wing," Jack hastened to remark, sensing possible trouble which would be in the nature of a serious calamity just then.

"Go to it then, matey," Perk told him, lightheartedly enough, "I'm ready to do my stuff as a half-cooked engineer. Don't worry a bit about

my gettin' there with both feet if the bally motor only holds together. Don't like its looks any too much, but then Lady Luck seems to be givin' us a heap o' favors, so we're goin' to finish after the Garrison style—heavy on the home stretch."

Before Perk reached the last word his chum had gained his seat in the cubbyhole of the amphibian, and almost immediately called out:

"Cut that rope and let me get away, partner—hurry up before I get another and harder bump!"

Ten seconds afterward the airship was entirely free from contact with the drifting sloop. Then came the roar of the motor showing that Jack had given her the gun. Instantly there was a forward movement of the amphibian, which increased rapidly until it was rushing along with great speed presently lifting its nose toward the heavens and leaving the rolling surface of the gulf, soared aloft in repeated circles.

Perk, after seeing that his pal was well on his way, turned his attention to his own job. He had no particular trouble in coaxing the engine to start, although it did considerable "grunting" as though its joints might be rusty and in need of lubricating oil, thus telling that the late skipper had allowed his engineer to neglect his duties in a climate where the salt in the air always rusted the inside of gun barrels, machinery of all

descriptions, and in many ways played havoc with exposed metal parts.

However, after the engine got well warmed up it began to work more smoothly so that Perk lost some of his first anxiety.

"Goin' to get along okay I guess," he assured himself and then, keeping the prow of his vessel headed due south, he found time to try and discover where Jack and his soaring crate might be.

The engine was a gas motor and well supplied with an abundance of fuel, since the winds on their recent voyage around the Florida Keys must have been favorable as a whole and with the motive power idle there had been no drain on the gas.

Perk was feeling prime at that particular moment in his checkered career. It afforded him much pride to thus be in sole charge of a captured rum-runner with a cargo of contraband aboard. Then, too, all doubts concerning his ability to serve as an engineer were already dissipated for the sloop was making fair time and carried a bone in her teeth, as the white lines of foam running out on either side attested.

Perk was softly singing to himself some marine ditty he had picked up in the course of his adventurous life afloat and ashore and which had for a title "Rolling Down to Old Mohea"—it thrilled him to the core to feel that he was

luckily able to afford Jack just the assistance the other required so as to perfect his plan of campaign.

Now he believed he could glimpse the amphibian overhead—yes, the moon, poking her nose out from behind a bank of clouds, allowed him to make certain—Jack had swung back and was circling, so as to keep the sloop within range of his vision.

"Just like a guardeen angel," mused the enraptured Perk, standing at his post and sending frequent curious as well as proud glances aloft, "as he told me he meant to be. Say, ain't this simply great stuff we've struck?—never felt so joyous in all my life as when I smashed them two tear-bombs down on the deck here an' busted up that fightin' mob. Zowie! how quick they got a move on, every single man but the one lone dickey we found knocked out down below-stairs. Ev'rything movin' along like silk—who cares whether school keeps or not, with us boys on the top wave o' success."

Then he concluded to stop premature boasting, knowing very well that as in a game of baseball nothing is settled until the last man has been put out.

So the voyage down the coast continued steadily enough, the minutes running along into

hours, with faithful Perk keeping steadfastly at his new job.

From time to time he would find the plane hovering directly over his head, and was able to catch certain signals which he could understand because of a previous arrangement he and Jack had.

Although the moving sloop was not over a mile or so from the shore line, it was next to impossible for Perk to catch a fleeting glimpse of land, so as to get his bearings.

"Huh!" he told himself at one time after he had received instructions to draw a bit further toward the open gulf, as he was approaching some point of land jutting into the water, and thus making a shoal possibly covered with coon-oysters, on which he was apt to pull up hurriedly with disastrous results, "this here is like flyin' blind at a five thousand-foot ceilin',—Jack, he c'n see the land by usin' the night glasses, so it's a good thing I c'n get tips from him right along. Gee! this sure is gettin' some monotonous, keepin' this old motor hummin' when it's on the blink so bad. Must be a wheen past midnight, I'd say, an' we ought to be clost to them Ten Thousand Islands by now."

He had been keeping close watch on the stars and although making no claims to being a first-class woodsman, Perk could tell the time of

night by the heavenly bodies setting one after another, which would account for his late confident assertion that morning could not be so very far distant.

Once only during all this time did Perk happen to see a far distant light out at sea. It interested him more or less and naturally caused him to speculate as to whether it might have any connection with the great game in which he and Jack were now engaged. Everything he had ever heard or read connected with the Mexican Gulf seemed to pass in review through his active mind — there was a halo of romance hovering about that historical sheet of salt water and while Perk was not much given to flights of fancy, he found himself picturing some of the thrilling scenes he had recently read about, after learning that the next locality in which he and Jack would play their adventurous part was along the Florida Gulf Coast.

Then he suddenly found himself listening intently, for above the pounding of the old motor, with an occasional "miss" to break the monotony, he fancied he had caught the signal Jack was to give him when the time arrived for making a turn toward the coast.

"Bully boy, Jack!" Perk cried out when he found that he had not been deceived, "I'll be right pleased to drop this tiresome job an' think

myself some lucky to miss havin' the tub run on a reef, or the bally motor kickin' off an' quittin' cold. Yes, an' there's what looks like a bunch o' cabbage palms stickin' their tops against the skyline. Better slow up, Perk, old scout, afore you hit some stump or get aground off shore.

So he throttled the motor a bit and fairly crept along. He even found himself wishing he had fixed things so that the prisoner might stand by with a sounding pole in the bow of the sloop to sing out the depth and give warning of sudden shallows but it was too late now to attempt such a thing, even if he had dared take the chance of the fellow jumping overboard and either drowning or getting ashore to give warning as to the menace hovering above the operations of the far-flung smuggler combine.

But fortune was still kind and presently Perk found himself softly gliding past the outermost mangrove islands. Here, he remembered, it was his duty to come about and lay to until Jack could drop down and taxi over to where the sloop lay so as to consider their further plans in the coming dawn.

CHAPTER X

TAMPA BOUND

"Congrats, Perk," said Jack, as soon as he came close enough, "you did the thing up in first-class shape. If all other jobs went back on you I reckon you could get your papers along the engineering line. A bit tired in the bargain I take it, partner?"

"Lay off on that stuff, matey," replied the other, scornfully, "me, I never get what you'd call tired, but jest the same I'm right glad it's all over an' the rotten crate didn't get sunk out there—hate to lose all this bottled juice we come by in such a queer way. Climb aboard, Jack, an' let's have a little talk-fest while we rest up."

"Later on I'd be glad to do that," he was told. "We'd be wise to push further in among these islands before morning comes along if any sponger or fisherman happened to glimpse this pair of odd sea and air craft he'd spread the story far and wide and get us in Dutch. I'll fasten a tow line on to the ship here, if you'll toss me a coil and taxi away back where there

wouldn't be one chance in a thousand of our being seen."

"I get you, buddy," Perk hastened to say, as he made ready to toss the bight of stout rope to his waiting chum, "and it's all to the good with me. Dandy luck we've been havin' for a fact, on'y hope it keeps on that way to the finish line. Here you are, Boss!"

After Jack had made the small hawser fast he started the taxi stunt and presently they were moving past the outlying clumps of mangroves with never a bit of trouble. Perk made himself comfortable by throwing his really fatigued form flat on the deck and stretching his muscles to the limit.

This continued for some little time until finally Jack shut off his power and came alongside, ready to climb aboard the sloop.

"We'll tie her up to this nearby clump of mangroves, where you'll notice there's a bunch of tall palmetto trees growing, showing there must be ground, such as few of these islands can boast. I'm picking this place especially because those cabbage palms will keep the mast of the sloop from sticking up and betraying its location to any flyer passing over."

"I'd call that a mighty fine idea, partner," declared Perk enthusiastically. "Never would athought o' anything like that myself—my old

bean don't work along them lines I guess. An' when I've done that camouflage act again nobody ain't agoin' to spy out a single thing down this-aways. Great work, if I do say it myself, Jack old boy."

After he had managed to fasten the bow of the sloop to one of the palmetto trees, Jack crawled aboard. He must have also felt more or less tired, after being caged in the small confines of the cockpit so long, for he followed Perk's example and dropped down on the deck to stretch out while they exchanged opinions.

"None too soon for our safety," was the first remark Jack made, "see, there in the east the sky has begun to take on a faint rosy tint which means the sun must be making ready to rise."

"Things are workin' just lovely for us, I'd mention, old hoss," suggested Perk, with one of his good-humored chuckles that told how well pleased he must be on account of the many "breaks" that persisted in coming their way. "Let the mornin' come along when it pleases, it don't matter a red cent to us back here in this gloomy solitude."

They started to exchange opinions concerning the remarkable happenings of the night just passed and in this way many things that had not been very clear to Perk were made plain. On his part he was able to offer several suggestions that

added to the stock of knowledge Jack already possessed so that it was a mutual affair after all.

"I rather reckon somebody's going to get a surprise packet when I finish explaining just how this contraband sloop and cargo fell into our hands," Jack was saying at one time, apparently vastly amused himself. "Fact is, I wouldn't blame the Commissioner for believing I was drawing the long bow when he hears about those tear-bombs you tossed out that scattered the crowd like I've heard you tell a shell used to do when it dropped into a dugout over in the Argonne."

As they lay there taking things easy, the heavens in the east assumed a most wonderful range of various delicate tints that made even Perk gasp with admiration. Birds started singing, mocking birds and cardinals among others, crows could be heard cawing close by as though there might be a hidden bird roost not far distant. This was corroborated later on when streams of white egrets flew past, scattering to find their morning meal.

So, too, circling buzzards could be seen far above as they searched for signs of a feast in the shape of a dead fish cast ashore on some sandbar or mudbank—a heavy plunge not far away told of a monster alligator that had been lying asleep on some log, taking a dive as he noticed the pres-

ence of two-legged human enemies whom he had reason to suspect of designs on his life.

"How about a little grub for a change, partner?" demanded Perk, after they had been talking for quite some time.

"I reckon it wouldn't come amiss," admitted Jack; "but if you've got any idea of starting a fire and making coffee, better throw that overboard right away, for in the first place you'd find it a hard job to run across any solid ground among all these mangrove islands and then besides it might not be the wisest thing going to send up a column of smoke to attract attention to this quarter. Get that do you, Perk?"

"Y—es," admitted the other, with a disconsolate shrug of his shoulders as if he had no liking for the scheme being thus tabooed, "s'pose it's jest like you put it, Jack, though I own up I was hopin' we might make a pot o' coffee. Just the same we got plenty o' fresh water along, even if it is sorter warm an' coffee'd taste just prime, but I c'n stand anything when necessity drives. So let's get our teeth in some eats without botherin' further, 'cause I'm half starved an' them sandwiches'd go fine."

Accordingly they started operations, Perk clambering aboard the amphibian to fish out the package of "eats", he knowing best where it had

been secreted on the previous evening after they had supper near this same spot.

As they munched their dry food they continued to talk, finding plenty of subjects bearing on their work that would be the better for further study.

"There's only one way we can arrange things so as to keep our clutch on the spoils we've rustled so far and do our duty according to orders."

"I kinder guess I c'n smell a rat already, Jack," chuckled Perk as he wrapped up the remnant of the food supply which he had taken from their main stock—"I'm the goat in the deal—you figger on me stayin' here in this 'gator hole to stand by the ship an' knock the block off'n anybody what tries to get away with our property—how's that for a straight hit square in the bullseye?"

"Go up head, Perkiser—you got the answer first clip, for that's just what has to be put through. I'll start off presently and make a bee line for Tampa where they told me our immediate boss, Colonel Tranter, is stopping with his sick wife. I'll make my report direct to him and take further orders. He'll like enough detail a couple of revenue men on duty along the East Coast to come back with me to where you're lying here so they can take the sloop and her wet

cargo to Tampa to be given over to the proper officers who will see that no clever smuggler has half a chance to run away with her."

"I c'n easy enough see how you've thunk ev'ry thing out, an' on'y need a little time to put the scheme through with a rush. Tell me, Jack, will you be apt to get any further lines on the way things stand down here?—there was some talk, I 'member, about them bein' able to give us a few pointers concernin' them higher-ups the Government is so anxious to cage so as to break this whole gang up for keeps."

"Certainly, I intend to ask about that very thing," came Jack's ready reply, "and I'm also in great hopes they'll be able to add some news worth while, that, in conjunction with what we already know, or suspect, will put us sleuth hounds on the hot trail of the big millionaire they feel certain has been the main backing of the whole ugly bunch while keeping in the background himself all the while. They're depending on you and me, Perk, to produce the evidence that's going to convict him of conspiracy against the Government, which may send him to Atlanta for a dozen years or more."

"Know how long you'll be away, Jack?" demanded the other casually as if it was really a matter of but little moment to him what the answer might be, since he could be depended on to

hold to their booty with the tenacity of a leech.

"That all depends on circumstances—I may be back by noon, and again not till late in the afternoon or evening. I expect to fetch a couple of sandbaggers along who will take over the sloop and stuff that's aboard. Having washed our hands clean of those encumbrances we'll be in fit shape to delve deeper into the game and see what we get out of the grab-bag. Anyway, don't expect me until you see me heading this way and keep a sharp lookout, for from all accounts this crowd we're up against is said to be a tricky combination, always stepping on their toes and doing big things."

"Yeah, we've heard lots o' that kind o' stuff but just the same the lads makin' up the crew o' this sloop didn't keep their eyes open, or they'd never been taken unawares by them hijackers. Leave it to Gabe Perkiser to hold fast to what he's got; they'd have to be a regiment, armed with machine guns, bombs, an' even gas, to knock *me* off'n my perch an' I don't mean that for boastin' either, Jack."

Later on Jack decided it would be just as well for him to jump off and be on his way to Tampa. Contrary winds or something else might delay his arrival, and an early start was bound to be of much help toward bringing a quick return.

He first used the binoculars in order to scan

the heavens as well as they could be covered when he was so surrounded by those strange mangrove islands and discovering no sign of any cruising, spying crate, he bade Perk goodbye and taxied in the direction of the open gulf, which he knew lay due west.

Perk answered his signal ere the amphibian turned a bend in the tortuous channel and saw Jack vanish from view; nor could he long detect any sound to indicate the presence of an airship since cautious Jack had again made use of that wonderful "silencer" which they had found so useful while conducting their search during the preceding night. Then the appointed guardian of the captured contraband sloop turned his attention to matters which had to do with his making the tied-up craft as thoroughly invisible from the upper air as he knew how.

CHAPTER XI

PERK HOLDS THE FORT

First of all Perk set about getting the one boat that had been left aboard the smuggler sloop into the water as he would need it for conveying his green material with which he intended to cover the exposed deck.

There was little trouble about accomplishing that and when he dropped into the rowboat with a pair of excellent oars in his possession, he felt considerably encouraged.

So he started to poke around, hoping to run across some island that was more than a mere patch of the omnipresent mangrove tangle. This he succeeded in doing without much loss of time and his pleasure redoubled at finding a mass of dwarf saw-palmetto that would yield him a plentiful supply of fronds with their queer serrated edges such as would stab cruelly unless one took care to handle them properly.

Here, too, were some young palmetto trees with the new leaves within easy reach. Working with a vim Perk speedily loaded his small boat with green stuff, after which he returned to

the sloop and proceeded to scatter his material to the best advantage all over any exposed part of the contraband vessel.

It necessitated a second trip before he felt satisfied for whatever his shortcomings might be in other respects, Perk always tried to fulfill his whole duty whenever he tackled a job.

By the time he had finished he was "reeking wet" as he called it, with "honest-to-goodness sweat," not perspiration, but it was worth all it cost to be able to feel that the sharpest vision on the part of a sky pilot passing over the spot, and even equipped with powerful binoculars, would not be able to detect the presence of the sequestered runaway sloop.

"Good enough," he told himself, as he lay down to rest a bit and scan the blue heavens so as to learn whether there was any sign of a cloud chaser from horizon to horizon where the clumps of mangroves allowed him a clear vision.

Several times he gave a little start, and proceeded to strain his eyes so as to make doubly sure, but in every instance the moving dot he had noted far away to the north or nor'east proved to be a circling buzzard, keeping up his eternal weaving to and fro in search of a belated breakfast after his own peculiar kind.

So the time passed, and Perk even dozed, lying there amidst his "Palm Sunday greens," as

he fancifully called the camouflage stuff, for the climbing sun kept getting warmer, and induced somnolence, especially after such an eventful night as the one he and Jack had just passed.

Later in the morning he sat up, took another cautious look around at the clear sky, and then proceeded to enjoy a good, old-fashioned smoke, for Perk was a lover of his under-slung pipe *a la Dawes.*

Noon found him thus, picturing his chum arriving at Tampa and interviewing the Government official who could give him what assistance he required so as to turn over the captured sloop and the contraband it carried, both above and below decks.

At one time Perk out of curiosity—as well as a desire to be in a condition to state the amount of spoils he and Jack had "corraled" in their swoop upon the fighting smugglers and hijackers—took a pad of paper and a pencil and proceeded to go over the entire vessel, securing a rough invoice of the numerous piled-up cases bearing that foreign, burnt brand.

Then a temptation gripped him, and, as he took another "eyefull" sweep of the azure arch overhead, to again find the coast clear, he tortured himself with the vision of a pot of boiling coffee to go with his otherwise dry midday snack of lunch.

"Huh! no use talkin', I jest *can't* stand it any longer—got to have my coffee if I want to keep happy as a clam at high tide. Nothin' to prevent me paddlin' across once more to where I got these here greens. I noticed heaps an' heaps o' dry wood, broken branches, stems o' palmetto leaves an' such dandy trash for a quick fire. Might as well tote the machine gun along, so's to be ready for anything that comes—it could be a frisky twelve-foot 'gator wantin' to climb me or mebbe one o' them sly painters I been told they got down in this queer old country. Anyway, here you go, Perk, coffee-pot an' all."

He was soon busily engaged in building his little fire, hoping no hostile eyes might detect the trailing smoke ascending above the tops of that palmetto clump. Then came the pleasing task of watching his coffee pot as it stood on the tilting firewood, a job that required constant vigilance if he hoped to save its precious contents from spilling.

Presently the odor began to fill him with delight and later on he found himself sitting cross-legged, like a Turk, and swallowing gulp after gulp of the amber fluid he loved so well.

Taken altogether it proved to be as satisfactory a little lunch as Perk had partaken of in some time. After finishing the entire contents of his coffee pot, he concluded it would be just as

well for him to clean up, destroying all signs of the fire, and return to the sloop.

He had good reason to shake hands with himself because of this exhibition of caution, for later on, as the afternoon began to lengthen, with the sun starting down toward the western horizon, he suddenly began to catch faint sounds such as sent a sudden thrill through his whole nervous system.

"Dang it if I ain't hearin' somethin' right like human voices," he told himself, cocking up his head the better to listen, and applying a cupped hand to his right ear. "Yep, that's a fact, an' over in that quarter to boot," nodding toward the northeast where his instinct told him the mainland must lie, even if some miles distant.

So, too, he decided later that the suspicious sounds kept growing louder, from which fact he judged the speakers were slowly but surely approaching his hiding place.

"All right, let 'em come along," Perk muttered grimly as he clutched that deadly little hand machine-gun with which he could pour a rain of missiles in a comparatively speedy passage of time. "They can't ditch me, I kinder guess, an' nobody ain't agoin' to grab this crate if I have to shoot up the hull mob o' galoots."

Nevertheless, since there was always a fair chance that the secreted sloop might escape dis-

covery, Perk finally concluded to dispose of his own person, at the same time meaning to keep in readiness to give the intruders a hot reception, did the occasion warrant such a course.

Then he could hear what he knew to be the splash of oars, and squeaking sounds of the rowlocks. But he had already discounted this fact, knowing as he did the impossibility of anyone ever reaching the fringe of that vast wilderness of mangrove islands in which many a fisherman had been lost, never to find his way out of the myriad of zigzag channels without the possession of some manner of boat.

On they came until finally Perk realized they were just around the corner, for he could pick up every word that was uttered as well as see specks of foam from the working oars as it carried past, the tide being on the ebb just then.

"Told yuh it was a steamer runnin' past thet sent up yer smoke trail, Zeb," a harsh jeering voice was saying, accompanying the words with a string of oaths as though he felt more or less "mad" because of the exertion necessitated in working at the oars so long and on a bootless errand at that.

"Wall," came another drawling voice in which keen disappointment could be detected. "I judged it shore lay in this direction, but like yuh says, it must'a ben a steamer out yonder on the

gulf—mebbe thet rev'nue boat they done tole us to watch out fur er else some o' them spongers frum up Tarpon Springs way. Anyhow, I got all I wants o' exercise so I move weuns call hit a day an' get back to the shanty."

"Yas, thet's the best thing we kin do," agreed the other, with a snarl in his heavy voice, "we got heaps o' work ahead tonight, if so be thet Fritz airpilot does drop over with his batch o' yeller boys like weuns been told he'd do. I'd like tuh see the whole caboodle o' Chinks dropped inter the middle o' the gulf, I hate 'em so, but thar's good money in the game, we happens tuh know, Zeb, which I jest caint hold back on nowhow. Les go!"

Greatly to the relief of the listening Perk he heard the sound of splashing gradually recede until finally it died away completely. This gave him a feeling bordering on relief, for while Perk was an old hand at the fighting game and stood ready to give a good account of his ability to defend their prize; at the same time he had no violent desire to open up on the two occupants of the unseen rowboat nor yet was the idea of the sloop being discovered at all to his taste.

"Lucky lads you might count yourselves if on'y you knew how I was layin' right here in ambush, ready to sink that boat an' make the biggest sort o' a splash. An' I'm guessin' I got off

right smart 'bout that cookin' fire racket, come to think of it—might a'spilled the beans all right, and made all sort o' trouble for our crowd."

Talking in this fashion to himself, Perk again set about taking things comfortably nor did he ever hear of that pair again. Still, he treasured up in his mind what he had heard the man with the harsh voice say in connection with the smuggling of unwelcome Chinese immigrants who were ready to pay so well for an opportunity to beat the Government regulations in their eagerness to join the foreign colony in Mott Street, New York City, where the vast majority of them were bound. It would naturally interest Jack when he heard the news, although it could hardly be considered startling, since they already knew full well this sort of thing was being carried on by daring airplane pilots in the service of the far flung smuggling combine.

By now it was well past the middle of the afternoon. Light fleecy, white clouds had been drifting up from the direction of the Dry Tortugas and Key West but this far they did not look at all portentous, as though any kind of a storm might be brewing. Perk hoped that would not turn out to be the case since they had work planned for a part of the coming night, which would be greatly hampered by unsettled weather.

Then, on making one of his habitual observa-

tions of the upper air, he discovered a moving speck that he soon decided must be a plane heading in his direction. At first Perk fancied it must be Jack on his way back, but later on he realized the air craft bore a great resemblance to the Curtiss-Robin boat which they had figured belonged to the Hun pilot, Oscar Gleeb.

CHAPTER XII

OLD ENEMIES FACE TO FACE

"Je-ru-salem crickets!" Perk told himself as he stared, "I do b'lieve that's the same Curtiss-Robin crate we saw before, an' making direct for this here section o' the map in the bargain! Now I wonder what he wants to barge in for when things seem to be doin' their prettiest for us fellers? Guess I'd better get ready for boarders. If that smart guy took a notion to swoop down for a close-up o' these mangrove islands, he'd be apt to pick me up, 'specially if he happens to own a pair o' glasses, which stands to reason he sure does. Huh! what a bother. Better be slow 'bout foolin' with a buzz-saw, that's all I c'n say to him."

No sooner said than done, which was Perk's usual way of playing the game. He changed his position for one that offered less chance for discovery and while about it Perk started to build up something in the shape of a formidable fortification.

"What luck to have all these logs lyin' around when I need them," he went on to tell himself

with many a dry chuckle. "Guess now they had 'em aboard to pull the wool over the eyes o' any customs men that happened to board the sloop lookin' for contraband stuff—meant to claim they was fetchin' mahogany logs to a States market. Gee whiz! they sure are a tough proposition to move around but here's the cutest little fort any playboy could wish for. Let him come along—who cares a red cent what he does, so long's I got this here machine-gun with plenty o' cartridges in the belts to riddle things with. Ring up the curtain, an' let the play start. Makes me think I'm back in the old line again along the Argonne, an' say, jest 'magine how it all works out with one o' them same Hun pilots swooping down on me! It sure is to laugh, boys."

By this time the oncoming plane was drawing perilously near and Perk wisely settled himself so that he could see all that occurred.

He possessed a pair of marvelously keen eyes and while it would have simplified matters considerably had he been handling those wonderful binoculars, just the same he could get on without them.

By close application he was able to see a figure bending over the ledge of the cabin window, apparently scrutinizing the queer combination of mangrove patches and crooked water passages between. The plane was rushing down a steep

slant in a clever dive, or glide, so that with the passage of each second the chances for the pilot to make a discovery increased.

"Gosh! but ain't this the life, though?" muttered the watcher, thrilled to the core with what was hovering over his head yet not so much as making the slightest movement that would attract attention. If discovery must come, Perk was determined that no act of his would hasten it along and no responsibility for the tragedy—if such there followed—could be laid at his door.

He had discovered some time back that the rival crate resembled their own, in that it was in the amphibian class—could hop-off either from the land or when on the water.

Really he had taken it for granted that such would turn out to be the case, since occasions without number must arise when, for instance, the smugglers wished to take alien Chinamen from some schooner or speedboat by means of which the first part of their journey to the Promised Land had been carried through, when it would be necessary for the plane to drop alongside the boat from Cuba or other foreign ports and make the transfer.

The prospect was far from displeasing to Perk—he felt positive that it would be the first time on record when one of Uncle Sam's Secret

Service men fought it out with a taxiing seaplane on the subtropical waters of the great gulf.

The outcome of course was hidden behind a haze of mystery—one, or both of those engaged might never live to tell the story but then that sort of uncertainty had been his daily portion during his thrilling service on the French front and its coming to the surface again after all these years of less arduous labor only made Perk hug himself, theoretically speaking.

Now the flying ship was passing directly over his place of concealment, although at rather a high ceiling. Would the argus-eyed pilot make any suspicious discovery, or, failing to do so, continue his scrutiny along the many leagues of similar mangrove islands stretching far into the south?

Perk saw him pass the spot, which caused him to imagine the game was all off, and he would have nothing but his trouble for his pains. Indeed a sense of heavy disappointment had even begun to grip his heart when he saw the other suddenly bank and swing as though meaning to come back again.

"Zowie! kinder looks like he *did* glimpse somethin' that struck him as wuth a second scrutiny," chuckled the anxious watcher, that delicious thrill once more sweeping over his whole frame.

Indeed, it was a moment of more or less suspense, although Perk was telling himself he did not care a particle whether the smuggler pilot discovered the mast of the sloop, with its camouflaged deck below or not.

He was only hoping that the other might not take a notion to fly overhead and try to drop some sort of a miserable bomb down upon the spot where things looked a bit suspicious to him. Possibly Perk still seemed to get a faint whiff of the tear gas that had drenched the smugglers' boat at the time he himself hurled those two bombs with such deadly accuracy and the possibility of being himself made the target of a similar attack was anything but pleasing for him to contemplate.

This time the Curtiss-Robin sped past not much more than three hundred feet above, so that he could plainly make out a head, with its protecting helmet, earflaps, and goggles, that was projected from the cabin.

"Darn his nerve, if he ain't wavin' his hand to me to say, 'I see you little boy, you're it'! Spotted me, danged if he didn't, by ginger! an' now the fun's a'goin' to start right along. Wow! this is what I like, an' pays up for a wheen o' lazy days. How the blood does leap through a feller's veins when he feels he's in action again. Oscar, old boy, here's wishin' you all the compliments o' the

season an' I hereby promise to send back whatever you throw me. Go on and do your stuff, old hoss—I'm on to your game okay!"

He found further cause for congratulation when he made certain that the plane was now headed for the smiling surface of the little bay close by, showing that the pilot intended to make his little splash, and take a look at the hidden sloop with its illicit cargo of many cases that had been so mysteriously snatched from the hands of those with whom he was in close association.

This was as Perk would have it if given any decision in the matter. Once the amphibian started to taxi toward him and they would be placed on the same footing, each with a machine gun to back him up and former experience in handling such a weapon equally balanced. Could anything be fairer than that, Perk asked himself, preparing for business at the drop of the hat?

The plane had made contact with the water and was floating there like an enormous aquatic fowl of some unknown species. Now the pilot was making a right turn as though meaning to come down on Perk with the western breeze—his motor was keeping up more or less of a furore, which told Perk that shrewd though these up-to-date contraband runners might be, at least they had slipped a cog by failing to keep up with

the inventions of the times, for undoubtedly this pilot had no silencer aboard his craft to effectually muffle the exhaust of his engine.

However, this was no time to bother about such minor things when the main issue was whether he was destined to "get" the ex-war ace, or the other put him out of action when the battle was on.

Perk shifted his gun so that its muzzle kept following the moving seaplane in its advance. Let Oscar but make a start in his projected bombardment, and Perk stood ready to answer with a similar fusilade that must rather astonish the other, for as yet he could have no assurance that the concealed sloop was manned—doubtless he would figure the seized craft had been hidden here and temporarily abandoned until such convenient time as the captors could return with recruits and run it to some port where the confiscated shipment might be turned over to the proper authorities.

Just the same Oscar Gleeb might think it good policy to make sure of his ground by spraying the boat's deck with a round or two of searching missiles before attempting to board it.

Whatever way the cat was going to jump, Perk knew the issue was bound to be joined before many more seconds slipped past, and he held himself ready.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN GREEK MET GREEK

The seaplane had stopped short, although its engine still rattled away as vehemently as ever. Perk understood the reason for this—Oscar may have been a hot-headed youngster away back when the great war was on, but apparently his later experiences had cooled his blood to some extent and he did not mean to be too rash.

Doubtless he could by this time plainly make out the sloop which was so skillfully concealed, especially from the air above, and there may have been a sufficiently menacing air about it that called for caution. He was not such a fool as to blindly walk into what might prove to be a clever trap, set by a bunch of those despised Government workers to catch him napping.

Accordingly he considered it good policy to hold off and pepper the sloop from stem to stern before taking any further steps at doing any boarding and seizing it for its rightful owners.

Then again, in order to get the best work from his firearms and have his hands free, he knew he

should fix matters so he could drop the controls and pay strict attention to his other job.

Perk was lying low, holding himself in readiness for action. He believed he would be amply protected by the logs he had piled up, but just the same he did duck his head involuntarily at the first crack of the machine-gun the pilot of the Curtiss boat was handling so lovingly, as though it might be an old and valued "baby" in his estimation.

But just the same Perk could not allow any misunderstanding to keep the other in ignorance of how matters stood—he had sent out his impudent challenge, and Perk was quick to accept it.

So the din was further increased by a second barrage, chiming in with perhaps its notes ranged along a little higher key, but on the whole playing skillfully and merrily its own part in the mad chorus that reigned.

How the chatter of those two rapid-fire guns did carry on, with the splinters flying everywhich way as the missiles tore them loose from the logs and the coaming of the sloop's deck.

Perk was compelled to do most of his work while keeping his head down, lest he be potted in that rain of bullets the other fighter was pouring in on him. Consequently he could hardly be expected to do himself full justice. Perhaps Oscar

on his part was working under a similar disadvantage, for he really had little in the way of a barricade to intercept the shower to which he was being subjected.

Lucky for him he had shown the good sense to stop his advance with considerable distance separating him from the hidden sloop—had they been closer there was not one chance in ten that some damage would not have placed his seaplane out of commission, even though the pilot himself escaped death.

Then suddenly a white flag shot up from the sloop's breastworks. Oscar, with the gallantry such as had ever distinguished the air fighters on both sides in those days that tried men's souls, ceased firing.

"Give up?" he was bawling, as the rapid-fire guns both became silent, while their hot barrels cooled off a bit.

"Not so you could notice it," Perk shouted. "Jest wanted to exchange a few words with you, if you're Oscar Gleeb, an' it's true that you was a live-wire over there in France an' the Argonne—say, is that all to the good, Mister Pilot?"

The other did not answer immediately. Plainly he must have been considerably astonished at the queer turn the engagement had taken; and then again possibly he did not exactly

like the idea of being compelled to acknowledge his identity, fearing it might be only a trap to ensnare him in the meshes of the law he had been defying so flagrantly.

"What's that matter to you?" he finally yelled testily, so that Perk began to suspect he must have touched up the other with one of the bullets that struck the seaplane.

"Oh! nothin' much," sang out the complaisant Perk, cheerfully, "on'y I wanted to let you know I was over there in the same line and had the good luck to send down a few o' you Hun pilots in a blazin' coffin. Wondered now if me'n an' you mightn't a had a private scrap o' our own in them bully times. Allers did hanker to have a talkfest with you, sense I heard 'bout you bein' one o' them bloomin' hot Junker pilots."

A hoarse laugh greeted this amazing sally of Perk's.

"Say, what sort of a crazy gyp are you to want to talk things over while we got this scrap on?" bellowed the helmeted man in the shot torn cabin of the amphibian. "That's our boat you're standin' on, and we need it in our business, see? Give you three minutes to clear out, for I'm comin' aboard. Get that, Kamarad?"

"Sure thing, Oscar old hoss, but when you do it'll be feet first, for I'm fixed to fill your carcass so full o' lead it wouldn't need any cannon ball

to sink you if you died at sea. So mind your step, Mister Pilot—jest been gettin' my hand in so far, but what's comin' next'll be a whole lot different, bet your boots!"

The other did not show the white feather but immediately set to work once more with his weapon. No sooner was its chatter "on the air" than Perk started giving his own gun a chance to show its worth. This made it lively again and once more those aggravating splinters began to scatter, worrying Perk not a little, for strange to say he dreaded lest one of them find lodgment in his anatomy and this troubled him much more than the possibility of being struck by a speeding bullet.

It was quite warm while it lasted, but presently Perk realized that the opposition had suddenly ceased. Being a polite man and always pleased to meet his antagonist on even terms, Perk also stopped firing. If Oscar had decided to advance once more and try conclusions at close quarters where it would be give and take, he, Perk, could prove himself a most accommodating chap.

Sure enough the engine of the amphibian had started up with increased vigor and Perk, cautiously lifting his head, saw that the plane was really in motion. But it was also veering to one side, which action might mean either one of two things—that the other had had quite enough of

this exchange of hot fire and was pulling out, or else that in his crafty German way he was meaning some sort of flank attack in hopes of carrying the fort.

Faster and faster was the taxiing airship rushing through the water and Perk continued to hold his fire, realizing that the fight was over.

"Go to it, Oscar old hoss!" he burst out, as he grasped this clinching finish of the strange engagement with the rival gunmen separating after a hot exchange of compliments, each apparently able to move off under his own steam, "Beat it for all you're worth while the goin' is good. There, he's lifted his crate in one big pull an' I kinder guess he ain't hurt much either, else he couldn't show so much steam. Wall, here Perk's been left in possession, after all that bluff he put up. But it sure was a dandy jig while it lasted."

At that Perk began to laugh as though the true perspective had flashed before his eyes for then, and later on, too, he was ready to declare that a more ridiculous as well as unprofitable battle had never been waged between two rival pilots of the upper air lanes.

Now the fleeing ship had mounted to a fair ceiling and was rushing off in a roaring zoom but Perk noticed his late foe was heading due east as though bent on picking out an entirely different direction from the one he had used

when coming with an impetuous rush to investigate the mysteries of the mangrove islands.

"Huh! that strikes me as a bit queer," Perk was telling himself as he gazed after the ship, now growing smaller and smaller as it placed miles between them. "Looks like Oscar might a remembered a mighty important engagement he ought to keep. Oh well, I've had my little shindig, and it's just as well we both came through okay—them as 'fights an' runs away, may live to fight another day,' that old sayin' has it which is sure a true thing. Hey! what's this mean—seems like I didn't come through as soft-like as I figgered I had—blood on my hand, yep, an' on my face ditto. Guess one o' them nasty zippin' bullets must a creased my ear, and fetched the juice a little. Shucks! nothin' to bother about I'd say."

He took his old red bandanna and dabbed at his right ear with many a grunt as well as chuckle.

"Seems like it's the only time I've weltered in my own gore for a coon's age," Perk was saying as he looked at the stains on his faithful if faded rag that had been his close companion on many a long flight through fog and storm, wintry cold and summer heat. "But then I got a notion Oscar must a'been nipped, too, mebbe a whole lot

worse'n me. Honors are 'bout even, I guess, and if ever I do run across that lad again I'm meanin' to shake hands with him, jest out o' consideration for the fox an' geese game us air pilots used to play in the big ruction over there."

By chance Perk turned his gaze in another direction for he no longer found any interest in keeping tabs on his late antagonist whose ship was now growing dim in the distance, having entered among a bunch of fleecy clouds.

Hardly had Perk turned his head than he gave utterance to a low cry.

"What do I see but another crate humping along this way, an' outen the no'th in the bargain?" he observed, with ill concealed eagerness in his tones. "Could it be Oscar, an' the other skunks got 'em a hull fleet o' airships to carry on their trade o' smugglin' in licker, diamonds an' Chinks that want to get in this country more'n they do the yeller man's Paradise? Oh! rats, what'm I thinkin' about—wake up, Gabe Perkiser, an' use your noodle like it was given to you to handle. To be sure that second plane is our own bus, with my pal handlin' the stick. An' I guess Oscar must a glimpsed him headin' this way, which made him reckon this wasn't the healthiest place in the country for a feller o' his size, so he skipped out *pronto*. Yep, that's my pal for a cookey, I'd know his way o' handlin'

a ship in a dozen an' as far as I could lamp the boat."

On the whole he was extremely glad to see Jack returning, although also pleased to know he had had his little frolic in a miniature battle that for the brief period of its life had been able to give him a most delicious thrill.

He watched the oncoming ship grow in size and noted the significant fact that its approach was so lacking in all the customary racket that deafens the human ear.

Then presently a hand waved to him, Jack swung around and dropped with a little splash upon the water—just where Oscar had so recently left it—to taxi along and pull up close to the camouflaged sloop.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COAST GUARD MEN

Perk made a discovery just then that afforded him more or less satisfaction. This was the fact that apparently Jack's mission to Tampa had not been in vain for he could see several heads in the cabin of the amphibian beside that of his best chum.

"Huh! 'pears like Jack fetched through okay, an' has ferried some guys back with him to take this stuff off'n our hands," Perk was muttering, even as Jack started to clamber aboard the sloop, being closely followed by a couple of determined looking young men.

"Back again, brother," Jack observed, as he clasped the extended hand of his partner, then gave a queer grimace upon taking note of the splintered coaming of the sloop as well as the badly pockmarked barricade of mahogany logs. "Say, what's all this mean, I want to know—looks like you might have been mixed up in some sort of rumpus while I was away!"

Perk grinned and nodded his head cheerfully. "Had a heap o' fun, old hoss, an' got loads o'

thrills out o' it. Mebbe now you noticed some sort o' crate just vanishing among them clouds off toward the east as you breezed along?"

"Thought I did," came the immediate reply, "but the visibility was getting poor, and I couldn't be sure it wasn't a buzzard, or even an eagle ducking in and out. What's it mean, Perk—was he kicking up a mess around here?"

"You said it, partner, an' his name was sure Oscar—Oscar Gleeb, 'cause he got mad as hops when I asked him, an' told me that wasn't any o' my business. But we sure did have a nice hot spell, Oscar'n me."

"Yes, and I reckon now you got your old right ear touched up again, Perk, for I can see streaks of half-dried blood running down your cheek."

"Yeah, he nicked me okay, an' if this keeps on much further I'll soon be taken for the Manassa Mauler, 'cause it'll gimme a cauliflower ear. Who are these two lads, Jack—look like they might belong to the Coast Guard."

"Just what they are—meet Tom Cairns and Red McGrath, who have been sent along with me to take charge of this contraband and hand it over to Mr. Philip Ridgeway, temporarily in charge of the Treasury Department interests along the West Coast here, with headquarters in Tampa—this is the fine pal you heard me speaking about a few times, boys—Gabe Perkiser,

commonly known simply as Perk, a veteran of the big scrap over in France where he flew one of those sausage observation blimps, and was later on considered something of an ace in our flying corps."

So Perk gladly shook the hands extended to him, grinned in his genial fashion, and from that moment on they were as brothers all.

"While we're stretching our legs, after being cooped up in that cramped cabin for some hours," suggested Jack, whose curiosity had naturally been aroused by the multitude of signs all around indicative of a warm session, "suppose you sketch your little adventure for us, Perk. And I want to say that Oscar was pretty much of a fool if he reckoned on snatching this boat away from an old fighter like *you,* when you had a nice new machine gun to back up your claims."

"Shucks! he showed the right stuff for a scrapper," expostulated the honest Perk, anxious to give credit where credit was due. "We stopped the barrage at one point to have a little chin, but unable to agree, we jest started all over again. An' I kinder guess I must've notched the critter some, for he hauled off an' skinned the cat by kickin' out. I was jest tellin' myself it sure turned out to be a good thing he didn't have any Chinks aboard at the time, 'cause they might've lost the number o' their mess in the racket—I'm

willin' to stop the yeller boys from crashin' Unc' Sam's gates, but I don't crave the job o' sendin' the poor dicks along to their worshipped ancestors, not me."

"Well, get a move on you, Perk, and let's have the story of your fight—did he drop down, and have it out with you on the water; or was he circling above your head all the while?"

"If you'll take another squint at these bullet marks, old hoss," said Perk, reproachfully, "you'll see they passed along on the level. Yeah, he was a square shooter I want to say and some day I'm hopin' me'n Oscar c'n shake hands, since the war's long past an' German is being taught again in our public schools."

Then he launched forth in a graphic, if terse, description of the remarkable battle that had so recently taken place. The others listened with intense interest, for if Perk did have a way of cutting his sentences short and never going into lengthy descriptions, nevertheless he made his points tell, and kept his audience of three breathing fast with the thrill they received.

"Now let's get a move on," Jack was saying after Perk had finished the exciting description of his adventure, "and go over all this mess of cases, so these boys can give us a little document to say how we turned over that number of boxes to their charge, together with the sloop. Mc-

Grath here used to run the engine of a tug in New York harbor and is well able to manage this rusty cub here—we found it capable of doing a day's work, you know Perk, on the way here."

Jack's word was law, since he was in command. Accordingly they started a systematic check of every case of bottled goods to be found aboard the confiscated vessel, above and below decks.

"Just an even two hundred and twenty-six," announced Jack, after they had gone over the entire lot twice with the same result. "I reckon a few got away aboard that speedboat but they didn't have much time to work the racket before the hijacker mob swarmed aboard and kicked up that riot—then along came Perk, with his armful of tear-bombs and broke up the Boston tea party in great shape. I'll make out a paper for both of you to sign, after which you can kick-off when you please."

All this was satisfactory to McGrath and his comrade and the paper having been duly signed, they set about examining the engine so as to learn whether it could have been injured in any way from the storm of missiles that came aboard during the hostilities so lately ended.

"The bally old thing seems to be in fairly decent shape for running," was McGrath's verdict after the checking had been completed, "and

since we've got some distance to cover before we make Tampa Bay, p'raps we'd better be shoving off."

"No such big hurry as that, boys," observed Jack. "I'm a bit hungry myself and reckon you both must be in the same boat. We've got plenty of grub, and to spare, also Perk here knows a few wrinkles along the cooking line. Suppose we have some sort of spread to celebrate Perk's victory."

"Huh! pleases me okay, brother," announced the expectant *chef,* "I've run across a little rusty kerosene burnin' stove here in what I'd call the cook's galley, an' we might as well have some hot coffee with the eats."

As there were no dissenting votes the motion was carried unanimously; whereupon Perk bustled around and soon had his coffee pot over an apology for a flame which would, however, answer their purpose.

It was only a simple supper, but with good appetites to back them, every one of the quartette declared it was great and would long be remembered.

Then the mess of saw palmetto leaves and other stuff utilized for camouflage purposes was cast overboard after which McGrath "fiddled" with the engine and soon had it running, limp and all, for its misses were plentiful, although

the engineer allowed there did not seem to be anything fundamentally wrong.

"If we have fair luck," he announced, confidently, "we ought to fetch our Tampa dock, where all prizes are tied up, before morning comes along. On the other hand, if we break down we'll either hang on to the sloop, or if luck runs against us, sink her, after smashing every bottle aboard."

"Good enough, Red," Jack told him as they shook hands for the last time. "I hope we run across you boys again some day, and please keep your lip buttoned about our being down here with an amphibian to knock some of these smugglers of Chinks and rum galley-west."

"You can depend on us to keep mum, Jack," the red-headed ex-harbor tug engineer assured him.

So the last line was cast off, Jack and Perk retired to their own ship, and with many a wheeze and complaint the sloop started to pass out to the open gulf, and commence the night journey to Tampa Bay.

CHAPTER XV

WITH THE COMING OF THE MOON

"Wall," Perk was remarking as the sloop passed beyond range of their vision amidst the gathering shades of night, already drawing her sable curtains close, "I hopes they get through without runnin' smack against a bunch o' the racketeers."

"With fair luck they ought to manage to slip along," Jack went on to observe, confidently. "You heard me warn them to keep a watchful eye out for smugglers and hijackers by land and sea and air? Anyway we've finished our part of the job and this paper proves that our find was all I cracked it up to be when I talked with Mr. Ridgeway."

"Course, you knocked up against the gent then, eh Jack?"

"Sure, or I shouldn't have been able to fetch those lads back with me to take over the sloop and contraband cargo," the other told him. "But I was in a tail spin at first when I learned that Mr. Ridgeway had gone down to St. Pete to interview some people who had reasons for not

wanting to be seen going into his Government offices in Tampa. But I got his address and jumped my boat, slipped down Tampa Bay, and pulled in at the long municipal pier at St. Petersburg."

"I first hired a dependable man to keep watch over my ship while I was off hunting my superior officer but I found him after a bit and he was sure glad to see me, shook hands like a good sport, and asked me a bunch of questions before starting to tell me what important fresh news he had picked up through his agents working the spy game for all it was worth."

"Was he tickled to learn how we managed to run off with that slick little sloop that carried so neat a pack o' cases marked with foreign stamps?"

"Seemed to be," came the ready answer. "He isn't a man of many words, you know, Perk but what he says he means. He told me they were banking on the pair of us to bring the high-hat chaps at the head of this smuggler league to the bar, with plenty of evidence that would convict them, no matter how many big lawyers they employed to beat the case."

"That sounds all to the good with me, old hoss," snapped the pleased Perk. "'Taint often we get half the praise that's comin' to us—not that I care a whiff 'bout that, though—satisfied to do my duty by Unc' Sam, an' let them high-

ups have the main credit. But I guess we'll get some kick out o' the game just the same an' that's worth all it costs us. Tell me, did this Mr. Ridgeway fork over any news worth knowin'?"

"He did," the other assured him. "I showed him those papers I found hidden in the cabin of the sloop, with a fine list of names, such as would cover customers who'd ordered the stuff they had aboard and he reckoned that several of them might point to the heads of the combine swinging the big smuggling deal."

"That would be a clue worth while, I'd say," Perk asserted warmly, his eyes flashing with renewed zeal as though he might be telling himself they must be getting on a pretty warm scent which would soon lead them to the party they sought above every one else — the capitalist whose word was *law,* and whose money purchased all the supplies, from liquor and vessels to aircraft and everything else needful for carrying on their business of swindling the Government through the Treasury Department.

Just as he always did in forestalling any likely move when an important case was placed in the hands of himself and Jack, Perk was already engaged in mentally spreading the net destined to gather in the chief culprits — the outlook promised a multitude of warm episodes calculated to stir the blood to fever heat and afford

him the wild excitement without which life lost much of its charm—in his eyes at least.

The pulsating throb of the old engine aboard the sloop had long since ceased to make itself heard, so that they could with reason believe McGrath and his pal well on the way to their distant goal, with no sign of stormy weather to be seen in the southwestern heavens.

"How 'bout spendin' the night here, partner?" Perk queried, as he sat contentedly smoking his favorite pipe after the manner of a man who had good reason to congratulate himself on the close of a perfect day.

"I was just thinking that over, Perk. We might be in a worse situation than this, if locality was all that mattered. I don't believe the 'gators would keep us awake with their splashing and roaring along towards early morning, but then I'm a bit bothered thinking of the man who skipped out after having his little machine-gun duel with you."

"You're jest crampin' my style when you say that, partner," complained Perk. "That Oscar happens to be a German, we both know, an' from what I learned about the breed when over there, they're some obstinate, once they get workin' in a game—hate to give it up wuss'n pizen."

"I see you're of the same opinion as myself, buddy," Jack remarked, nodding his head. "You

reckon there might be some chance for him to pick up a bunch of his mates and swing back here to do a little bombing on his own account. Well, we're not hankering to try our own medicine, not if we know it, and on that account I think we'd be wise to pull out of this and find a new refuge—perhaps on some lake back from the coast where we might pick up something interesting in our line."

"Je-ru-salem crickets! I kinder guess now you've got somethin' danglin' back o' them words old hoss," broke out the newly interested Perk, showing considerable animation. He was used to most of Jack's habits and could in many instances tell that something lay hidden back of his word—something of a character to promise great happenings when followed to a finish.

That seemingly casual mention of a freshwater lake was not made without some deep meaning—Jack must have been told something very important by the Government official with whom he had gone into conference at Tampa and this was his sly way of starting Perk's wits to working overtime in the endeavor to figure things out.

"Wait and see what's in the wind, Perk," said the head pilot, with a chuckle. "I promise to let you into all I know or suspect before a great while passes. Just now I'll own up this scheme

of slipping over to a certain sheet of fresh water for a change of base has a meaning that connects with our big game of Blind Man's Buff."

This seemed to square things with Perk, for he beamed as though pleased. Whatever Jack decided was always all right in his eyes because he felt certain that the bright mind of his comrade just could not make a blunder.

"When do we hop-off, then?" he said.

"Oh, when the moon shows up will be plenty of time," came the ready answer. "Our objective isn't so very far distant and you know we can make a hundred miles an hour if necessary. I'd like to pick up a bit of my lost sleep while we wait, unless you object to standing sentry."

"Not me, matey, I managed to snooze some during the time you were away. Lucky I had everything fixed for company and wasn't caught nappin' when our friend Oscar tipped his hat an' made his bow. Now I was wonderin' if he had that ole quick-firin' gun away back when he was riddlin' things along in the Argonne—wouldn't it be a queer thing if true? He knew how to rattle that cantankerous bus to beat the band an' he did nick me in that silly o' ear o' mine that keeps on gettin' in the way every time I have a little spat with a sassy guy."

Perk insisted on his chum making himself as comfortable as possible, considering the cramped

quarters they occupied in the cluttered cabin of their ship, which continued to keep up a soothing movement with the successive waves that worked in from the open gulf inclining a sleepy person to slumber.

"I'll jest sit here an' ruminate while I consume my tobacco," announced the accommodating Perk, making light of his job. "Once in so often I'll take a look skyward with the glasses, so's to know if there's any chance o' Oscar comin' back here to try it all over again. When the moon peeps up in the east yonder I'll put a hand on your arm, so's to let you know it's near time. Go to it, partner—do your stuff."

Jack was feeling pretty tired, since he had enjoyed mighty little decent sleep from one cause or another during the last few nights. It was not at all surprising, therefore, that he should be in slumberland before five minutes passed after he and Perk had exchanged the last word.

The self-posted sentinel did just as he had promised, every little while he would quietly stand up and with the glasses take a keen observation, covering the blue vault above from one horizon to another, then, finding all serene, he would silently resume his seat, with only a sigh to indicate how he felt. Once more he filled his everlasting pipe, began to puff delightedly, and

finally lay back in a half reclining position to smoke it out.

He was a great hand at ruminating, as he called it—allowing his thoughts to travel back to events that may have occurred months, and even years before, but which had been of such a nature as to fix themselves in his memory most tenaciously. This afforded him solid enjoyment, together with the charm of his adored pipe and he asked for nothing better.

Thus an hour, two of them, and more passed, with nothing out of the way taking place to attract his attention. He figured that if the pilot of the Curtiss-Robin crate intended to come back that night, he was subject to some sort of delay.

There was frequent splashing in the lagoon near by—at times Perk could tell it must be caused by jumping mullet, but on other occasions the sound being many times exaggerated, he reckoned it had been made by an alligator plunging off a log into the water, either alarmed by some sound further off, or else possessed of a desire to enter a secret underwater den he laid claim to. This would probably have a second entrance, or exit, up on some hummock that Perk had failed to discover when poking around on the preceding day hunting green stuff with which to conceal the deck of the sloop.

Suddenly Perk noticed a slim streak of pale

light fall athwart the propeller blade just before him and looking hastily up discovered the smiling face of the moon—a bit battered it is true, for the silvery queen of night was just then on the wane.

It was high time they were moving and making for the goal Jack had mentioned as an inland lake, though at no time did he give the name by which it was known to the settlers and tourists who flocked to Florida during the late Fall and early Winter. So he touched Jack on the shoulder, just he he had promised he would do, nor did he have to give the slightest shake for the other stirred and raised his head, showing he was wide awake.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LOCKHEED-VEGA FLYING SHIP

"Moon coming up, partner!" was all Perk said.

"Then it's time we were moving," Jack told him as he started to stretch his cramped arms and yawn. "Feel a heap better now after that little nap and ready for what's coming."

They did not have much to do, since everything was in perfect condition for hopping off—trust Jack for that, with his slogan of "be prepared."

"All set, Perk?" asked the pilot, presently.

"Shoot!" was the terse answer.

The bright moon would have to take the place of the customary equipment of a landing field in the way of guidelights, markers, and searchlights, but there was no necessity for so much light with the channel before him along which he could taxi unerringly, until, arriving at the point where the great gulf stretched out toward the western horizon, the speed must be advanced for the takeoff.

Now they were free from the mangroves and

Jack accelerated the pace of his ship accordingly —two twin foam-crested waves rolled out from the pontoons as they sped along until, testing things, Jack found that his charge was impatient to leave the water and leap upward into space.

Perk looked backward toward the scene of his amazing afternoon battle — how many times in the future would the picture rise in his memory to haunt him and bring that quizzical grin to his face.

With the newly risen moon gilding the small waves of the gulf below them, the picture looked most peaceful. Perk, although not much inclined to romance, could not but admire the spectacle after his own rude fashion while Jack fairly drank it in as he continued to pay attention to his manifold duties.

Their course was almost due north, Jack keeping out a score or more of miles from the coast, having reasons of his own for so doing— perhaps he found the wind more favorable out there and this is always an important factor in the calculations of a pilot of experience. Just as in the earlier days of ocean steamers when they were also equipped with masts and sails, the latter were always hoisted when the wind favored, since this helped them make progress and saved coal at the same time.

They had been booming along for something

like half an hour when watchful Perk, the observer, made a discovery worth-while he believed. He communicated with his companion, the useful ear-phones chancing to be in place—trust Perk for that.

"Somethin' doin' out there to the west, partner—look up to a higher ceilin' an' you'll see it. Headin' to cross over our trail in the bargain, I guess."

"A crate, all right," commented Jack, whose quick eyesight had immediately picked up the moving object.

"Looks like it might a come all the way across the gulf—d'ye think from some Mexican port, Jack?"

"Like as not," assented the other. "These crooks make a start from any one of a score of jumping-off places, but always with a specified landing-field ahead."

"Then you figger," continued Perk, "he might be one o' the gang, fetchin' Chinks across or mebbe precious stones, bought in Paris, and shipped to Mexico on the way to New York, eh, partner?"

"Chances are three to one that's what it means," Jack told him.

Perk continued to wield his important binoculars and presently, when the lofty plane was passing over, he stated his opinion.

"'Taint *him*, anyway, that's dead sure, Jack, I guess I ought to know a Lockheed-Vega crate, no matter how far away, or by what tricky moonlight either, 'cause you see I used to run one o' that breed for nearly a year when I took a whirl at the air-mail business up north out o' Chicago till I had a bad crash an' quit cold."

"That settles it then, partner," said the pilot, still observing the speck swinging past out of the tail of his eye. "I hadn't any idea it could be the same chap you had your little picnic with some hours back, for you told me he'd blown off toward the east."

"Jest what he did," replied the observer. "Ginger pop! but what wouldn't I give right now to know jest whar that galoot was meanin' to drop down, once he gets over the land. How 'bout that, old hoss?"

"It might help out considerable," admitted Jack although not as much interested as Perk considered he might be. "We'll sift things out in good time, and for all we know, run across a few surprises in the bargain."

Perk studied that last part for a minute, feeling almost certain Jack had some deep meaning back of his words, but it proved too much for his capacity in the line of figuring out mysteries, and so he dropped it like a hot potato," as he told himself.

The mysterious air voyager had by now disappeared entirely, although they might still have caught the throbbing of his madly working motor had it not been for their own engine kicking up so much racket, Jack not being inclined to make use of the capable silencer just then.

Perk had made up his mind that the unknown aviator, even if other than Oscar Gleeb, was undoubtedly working the same profitable line of business as the pilot of the Curtiss-Robin ship. So, too, Perk considered it worth while to try and figure out the exact course of the high flyer as he was probably making directly for his intended goal and this knowledge was likely to prove useful to them later on.

This he was able to accomplish. Working mental problems come easily to one who has played the part of a navigator aboard a modern galleon of the clouds.

"Huh!" grunted Perk after figuring out his problem twice and both times reaching the same conclusion, "the guy's really striking in to mighty near the same point Jack's meanin' to make and mebee now our lines might cross if we both kept on goin' long enough."

He studied this matter for some time, wondering if Jack also realized the fact and had kept silent about it for good and sufficient reasons.

It afforded the ambitious Perk considerable

satisfaction to hug the idea to his heart that possibly the chance might be given Jack and himself to locate some of these land stations where all this flagrant smuggling business was going on—the prospect of their's being the force to deal the outlaw organization a killing blow brought in its train the thrill he loved so well.

Then came the moment when Jack banked and changed his course radically, heading directly into the east where lay the peninsula of Ponce de Leon, seeker after the Spring of Eternal Youth, and finding instead, a land of flowers.

Perk knew what this evidently meant—that Jack had flown far enough up the west coast and was now bent on making for that inland sheet of fresh water he had mentioned to his comrade as a likely place for them to drop down and pass the balance of the night.

The uncertainty was keeping Perk keyed up to a high tension—something told him in no uncertain tones that Jack had a vastly more important reason far attaining that lake than the mere desire to avoid attracting attention—just what it might mean he could not guess, for when he attempted to solve the enigma he found himself floundering in a shoreless sea of doubt and uncertainty that was baffling, to say the least.

Perk was mumbling to himself as if he might be on the verge of reaching some sort of decision.

He bent forward several times as if about to make an important remark and on each occasion drew back, as though he could hardly decide how to approach the matter he had in his mind. Then he would chuckle, as if it might have its humorous side as well as a serious one.

Already had they reached a point where he could easily see the shore several thousand feet below and now Jack was sliding down as if bent on striking a ceiling that would be only a few hundred feet above the palmetto fringe Perk could distinguish running along the coast.

It seemed a fitting time for him to give Jack the start he contemplated and so, summoning his courage, Perk began to talk in as unconcerned a tone as possible.

"Partner, would you mind tellin' me what about this here Oswald Kearns?"

CHAPTER XVII

OKEECHOBEE THE MYSTERIOUS

"Say that again, Perk!" demanded the startled pilot, as though that apparently innocent question had given him a severe jolt.

"Oswald Kearns—kinder queer name, I kinder guess now, an' I'm wonderin' if I ever heard it before—that's all, Jack."

The pilot was busy with his work in handling the ship and therefore debarred from turning his head to look at his companion but at least he could put the astonishment he felt into words.

"So—you think that's a queer name, do you? Well, I'm asking you again, where did you ever run across it—who ever spoke it in your hearing, Perk?"

"Why—er, guess it was on'y *you,* partner," came the hesitating reply.

"You don't say?" gasped Jack, tremendously excited, "please tell me when that happened because I don't remember doing such a thing, though I meant to carry out our partnership arrangement this very night when we had settled down and could have a nice quiet confab—go on,

though, and say when I lifted the lid, and let you into this part of our big game, Perk."

"Huh! you talked in your sleep some, old hoss—first time ever I knew you to do sech a thing—said that name exactly three times, like it meant a heap in the bargain."

"You mean *tonight* while I was picking up a few winks of sleep—is that a fact, Perk?"

"Sure thing, boss—course I knew somethin' must be pesterin' you like all get-out, so I made up my mind to ask you who that Oswald might be an' what we'd got to do with such a critter."

Then Jack laughed as the humorous side of his recent thrill had begun to grip him.

"Well, well, seems like I'll soon have to put a padlock on my lips after this when I hit the hay. It's a serious offence for a fellow in *our* profession to give away his secrets like that! Never knew myself to be guilty of babbling that way before. Lucky you were the only one to hear me give the game away so recklessly. The joke is on me, partner.

"But say, Jack, whoever is this Kearns guy anyhow—I sure never heard his name before tonight an' I kinder got the idee in my head he must be some big-wig you ran up against when in Washington—somebody who had the orderin' around o' poor dicks like me'nd you."

"That's a far guess, brother," Jack told him,

"for the fact of the matter is, this Oswald Kearns happens to be a certain party just now under suspicion as being the king-pin of these smugglers who're giving Uncle Sam a run for his money down along this gulf coast!"

Perk took it with a little break, as though the information fairly staggered him, but he was quickly back again at his fly-casting—seeking information at the fount in which he had so much faith.

"You sent me into a reg'lar tail spin that time, Jack, but after tellin' me so much, it'd be right cruel to keep me a'guessin' any longer.

"I don't mean to keep you in the dark after this, Perk," he was told in jerky, broken sentences, as though Jack found it difficult to talk and pay the proper attention to what he was doing, for the amphibian had again commenced a steep dive, seeking a much lower altitude. "There are too many things connected with the story to try and spin it now—just hold your horses till we settle down on that lake, and you'll get it—all I know, or suspect, anyhow. Just now I can only tell you that this Kearns is a most remarkable personage, a baffling mystery to the Department who's outsmarted the whole Service and played his game of hide-and-seek before their very eyes—nobody so far has been

able to pick up a shred of positive evidence that would convict him.

"Gosh, amighty, we're flyin' high, buddy!" was what Perk exclaimed and immediately his wits went into a huddle. He must get busy and figure things out, just as football teams do when a change in signals becomes essential.

They had been passing over the land for some little time and still Jack kept heading almost directly into the northeast. He knew just where he expected to make his goal, due to a close application to his charts and maps of the Florida region.

Debarred from fishing for information while the flight was on, Perk was forced to seek consolation in making good use of his binoculars, sweeping the heavens for signs of other suspicious planes or endeavoring to make out the character of the terrain over which they were speeding.

Occasionally he managed to discover some tiny light and this gave him an opportunity to speculate as to its meaning—if isolated he concluded it must either be a campfire made by alligator hunters, or a street light in some small hamlet, such as he imagined might be found in this almost wild section of lower Florida where the Everglades with their eternal water kept settlers from picking out locations for starting

truck patches or citrus groves — all of which would probably be vastly changed when the great reclamation plans for draining had been fully carried out.

He often felt certain he glimpsed water below and had enough knowledge of the country to understand what that would mean.

"Wonder jest how long he means to keep this up," Perk was saying to himself when the better part of an hour had passed since they left the open gulf behind, "huh! by this time we must a'gone more'n sixty miles an' say, in places the hull State ain't more'n a hundred across from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mex. Gulf. Whoopee! could it mean he's aimin' to strike that terrible, big lake — Okeechobee — that overflowed its banks not long ago when they had that nasty hurricane and drowned a wheen o' poor folks around Moore Haven? Gee whiz! it's got me a'guessin' but then Jack knows what he's tryin' to do, an' I'm goin' to leave it all up to him to settle."

Somehow this suggestion appealed to Perk as being quite in line with the magnitude of their tremendous task—it was only appropriate to have the scene of their coming operations the biggest freshwater lake by long odds in the entire State, barring none — it would have been what Perk might term as "small pertatoes, an'

few in a hill," to have such a wizard of an operator as Oswald Kearns pick out an ordinary body of water, say of a mile in diameter, as his secret headquarters where he could continue to keep his whereabouts unknown to the Government revenue men.

Lake Okeechobee — well, that certainly offered some scope for any display of their own cleverness in finding the proofs they so yearned to possess in rounding up the "cantankerous varmint," as Perk was already calling Kearns in his Yankee vernacular.

It could not be much longer delayed, Perk assured his eager self—less than another hour of this sort of work would take them entirely across the peninsula, and cause the plane to fetch up somewhere along the Atlantic coast between Miami and Palm Beach. Much as Perk would like to set eyes upon those two opulent Southern winter resorts in the midst of their splendor, he felt that such a thing would hardly be proper under the conditions by which their visit would have to be governed—small chance for anything bordering on secrecy to be carried out in such a region of sport seeking and excitement day after day.

Ah! it must be coming closer now, he decided on noting how, far below the plane, he could make out what looked like a vast sea with little

wavelets glimmering in the light of the moon—assuredly that must indeed be the lonely lake, long known as the home of mystery, Okeechobee, the mightiest stretch of fresh water in the whole country of the South.

Jack was passing up along the western shore line as though his plan of campaign called for a descent in some obscure quarter where they could find a hideout in which to park their aircraft while they pursued their urgent call ashore.

Not the faintest gleam of light anywhere proved that settlers were indeed few and far between and this fact would also explain just why Oswald Kearns, wishing for secrecy and isolation, had selected this region as best suited to his purpose.

Now Jack was dropping steadily, his silencer in full play—it was time for Perk to get busy and through the use of his marine night glasses keep his pilot posted regarding what lay below them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MASTER CROOK

One thing Perk noticed with more or less satisfaction as they drew closer to the surface of the water was the fact that quite a stiff breeze seemed to be blowing out of the north. The waves were running up along the shore with considerable vigor and noise while the dead leaves hanging from the palmetto trees fringing the bank above the meagre beach kept up a loud rustling, such as would effectually drown any ordinary splash made by the contact of their pontoons with the surface of the lake.

Conditions could hardly have been more favorable for an undetected landing—the time was late, so that it hardly seemed as though any one would be abroad, the moon kept dodging behind successive clumps of dark clouds that had swept up from the southwest and everything seemed to be arranged just as Jack would have wished.

Perk had received instructions from his mate to keep on the watch for certain landmarks that would serve to tell them they were not far

distant from their intended location. When in due time he made out the wooded point that jutted out so commandingly from the mainland and had communicated that fact to the pilot, Jack turned the nose of his craft sharply downward, proving that the decisive moment was at hand.

Noted for his ability to carry through a delicate landing, Jack certainly never did a prettier drop into a body of water, fresh or salt, with less disturbance than on this momentous occasion, and they were soon riding like a wild duck, just within sight of the shore.

There were no signs of anything stirring along the waterfront, Perk observed, and yet if his suspicions were correct, there must have been considerable activity around that same spot, with a ship coming in laden with stupefied Chinamen, terrified by making such a trip from Cuba or some Mexican port in a "flying devil" that could soar up among the very clouds and span the widest of angry seas—perhaps on the other hand the incoming aircraft would bring a cargo of precious cases, each almost worth its weight in silver or maybe the skipper would carry a small packet in his pocket that might contain a duke's ransom in diamonds that would never pay custom duties to the Government.

No wonder then Perk was thrilled to the core

with the sense of mystery that brooded over this most peculiar locality — to him it already assumed a condition bordering on some of those miraculous things he could remember once reading in his boyhood's favorite book "The Arabian Night's Entertainment," the glamour of which had never entirely left him.

But already Jack was casting about, as though eager to find some place of concealment where they could stow the ship away and so prevent prying eyes from making a disastrous discovery —disastrous at least to those plans upon which Jack was depending for the successful outcome of his dangerous mission.

"We've got to taxi up the shore a mile or so," he was telling Perk in the softest manner possible, although the noise made by the rolling waves and the clashing dead palmetto leaves dangling from the lofty crowns of the numerous trees would have deadened voices raised even to their natural pitch.

"So," was all Perk allowed himself to say, but it testified to his understanding of the policy involved in Jack's general scheme of things.

This was done as quietly as the conditions allowed, and how fortunate it was they had held off from crossing over from the gulf until the middle of the night—but then it might be ex-

pected that Jack would consider all such things in laying out his movements.

In the end they managed to get the amphibian between two jutting banks where the vegetation was so dense that there was no chance of a trail or road passing that way. In the early morning Jack planned to once again conceal his ship, even as the captured sloop had been camouflaged by Perk's clever use of green stuff.

"That part of the job's done and without any slip-up," Jack was saying, vastly relieved, "and now we can take things easy for a spell, during which time I'll try and post you as far as I can about this queer fish, Oswald Kearns, and what they've begun to suspect he's been doing all this while."

"In the first place he's about as wealthy as any one would want to be, so the reason for his playing this game doesn't lie back of a desire to accumulate money. Some say he must have run afoul of the customs service in the days when he hadn't fallen heir to his fortune and all this is just spite work to get even—a crazy idea, but there may be a germ of truth in it after all."

"He has a wonderful place not far out of Miami—they all say it's a regular palace, where he entertains lavishly and yet not at any time have they known of a raid staged on his castle, as some call the rambling stone building that shelters a

curio collection equal to any in the art museums of New York City.

Every little while Oswald Kearns disappears and no one seems to know his whereabouts — some guess he's fond of tarpon fishing and goes out with a pal to indulge in the sport, his destination being kept secret so that the common herd can't swarm about the fishing grounds and annoy him; then another lot say he is not the bachelor he makes out, but has a little cozy home somewhere else with a wife who detests society and that's where he goes when away from the Miami paradise."

"Both of these guesses are wide of the truth— what they told me up at the Treasury Department set me thinking and I found some papers aboard that sloop we captured that opened up a startling line of action that might be unbelievable if it were any other man than the eccentric Oswald Kearns."

"By the way, Perk, after I'd committed the contents of those papers to memory I sent them by registered mail to Headquarters because, you see, something might happen to us before we get to the end of this journey and I reckoned the Department would like to be able to take advantage of our discoveries."

"You did jest right there, partner," Perk told him—he was sitting there drinking it all in with

the utmost eagerness. "It sure would be a pity if we kicked off an' Uncle Sam couldn't profit by what work we'd done. But what you've already told me 'bout this here queer guy gets my goat, like as not there never was a feller as full o' kinks as he is."

"I'm pretty certain of that, partner," Jack assured him, "there's no doubt about his having been gassed in the war and that might account for his actions — he's dippy along certain lines and he finds this way of defying the Government gives him the one big thrill he wants. It's almost incredible, I own up, but I believe we're going to prove it before we quit.

"Some men you know find this excitement in driving a speeding car along the beach up at Daytona at a hundred miles and more an hour, others go out and hunt tigers in India, lions and elephants in wildest Africa, but with this wealthy sportsman the craze takes the form of snapping his fingers in contempt at Uncle Sam's Coast Guard and all the revenue men in Florida.

"I was a bit skeptical at first, it all seemed so silly, such a whimsey for a rich man to fancy— taking such big risks just for the thrill he got— but the more I picked up about the man the less inclined I became to doubt, and by now I'm convinced it is the truth."

"But what makes him keep all this smuggling business clear of this wonderful show place near Miami?" asked Perk, apparently still groping as though in a daze.

"Just wants to be living his double life," explained Jack, "with one line never crossing the other—you might call it a Jekyll and Hyde sort of an existence. But the truth will come out in broad daylight if ever we *do* round him up and catch him with the goods."

"Er—'bout how long will we be in makin' some sort o' start, boss?" asked Perk anxiously.

"We may have to stick around here for some days while we do a little spy work and lay our net," Jack told him. "A great deal depends on how the land lies and what success we strike in making our approach—you know how it is with all golfers—approach means a whole lot to them. But if we have the good fortune to nab our man after making certain we have plenty of convincing evidence to be used against him, why there's our boat ready to spirit him away before his gang can forcibly take him off our hands."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SCENT GROWS WARMER

It all seemed so simple, as Jack put it, that Perk felt everything was bound to come their way eventually if not just then. All the same his sound common sense told him there was apt to be some pretty lively times in store for them before the end they sought had been obtained.

He had the feeling of one who had been fed up on thrilling details and figured on having a great volume of tragic possibilities to mull over in his customary fashion—for all the world, as Jack often told him, like a cow chewing her cud.

Realizing that Jack had now posted him thoroughly, Perk managed to curb his curiosity besides, the chances were his pal would be likely to frown on anything approaching garrulity.

Several hours passed and most of this time they spent taking short naps in order to keep in condition for anything that might crop up. Then came the dawn, to find Perk pawing over his haversack in which he had food stowed away,

with which he calculated to meet any "hold-over" that might come along.

That dawn was a wonderful one, especially for those unaccustomed to what Florida could offer in the way of sunrises. Even while the pair partook of their limited breakfast, they kept an eye on the amazingly delicate shades of color that marked the approach of the sun above the eastern horizon.

But they had work ahead and could not waste time by lingering over the early morning meal. In order to lessen the chances of discovery it would be necessary for them to conceal the ship from spying eyes and with his former effectual result in camouflage as a sample of how it could best be accomplished, Perk took it upon himself to repeat the operation.

They had aboard the amphibian a cleverly arranged collapsible canvas boat that could be launched in short order and was to be propelled by means of a short but serviceable paddle. While up in Canada with the Mounties, Perk had become quite proficient in the use of a paddle and also in balancing by sheer instinct while in a tipsy little canoe.

Accordingly he convinced his chum that since both of them could hardly expect to occupy the small shallop and carry any quantity of greens, it was up to him, Perk, to put the job through in

good shape. Jack could be checking up his motor and taking a survey of the boat so as to make certain it was in serviceable condition.

"'Cause you know, partner," Perk went on solemnly, "when we *do* want to skip out it's bound to be in a hoppin' hurry an' there'd be no time to look her over then, by jiminy. Jest lie around an' take things easy-like—your work is a'goin to be mostly with the brain, while I'm the lad to use the muscle."

Jack felt that since the canoe was so diminutive, Perk's logic was unanswerable, so he agreed to the division of labor.

"Only, if it turns out that the job's a bigger one than you reckon on, buddy, you'll let me take a whirl at it," he suggested, to which the other simply grinned and nodded his head.

The work went on steadily and Perk eventually had every part of the amphibian covered with deceptive green stuff, well calculated to hoodwink any air pilot passing directly over the spot.

This accomplished, he was ready to call it a day and drop down close to Jack for a resting spell. When they talked it was in low tones, almost bordering on whispers, for Jack took no chances of some enemy being within gunshot range of their hideout, whose ears would be likely to catch the sound of ordinary voices.

Jack, observing what his chum had accomplished, felt compelled to give the artist his meed of commendation.

"You sure made a fine job of smothering things with all this stuff, Perk," he told him, which was music in the other's ears, since he would rather have Jack praise him than any one he knew. "No easy thing to hide these stretched-out wings and the fuselage, too, as well as the shiny parts of the crate—motor, propeller, and such, but *you* fixed it to beat the band."

"Can that sort o' talk, partner—it was a soft job an' anybody with sense could a'done it as good as yours truly. Goin' to be a sure enough long day, 'cordin' to my way o' lookin' at it."

"Oh! nothing like having a little patience," commented Jack calmly, for he seldom showed signs of being in a hurry. "Men in our line of business must learn to just hang on and wait for the proper minute to strike the hook home in the fish's jaw."

"Yeah, an' then hang on some more, after they git the barb well hooked, with the game fish kickin' up an awful row," chuckled Perk. "Huh! don't I know how impatience is my besettin' sin and ain't I always a'trying' to curb it? That's why I'm crazy to work in double harness with you, brother, 'cause you hold me in when I feel like spreadin' myself brashly. Guess I know

when I'm well off. Time to take another spin in dreamland, seems like," with which remark Perk assumed as easy a position as the crowded cabin of the ship admitted, closed his eyes, and so far as Jack could tell from his regular breathing was asleep.

It was indeed a long morning for them both.

Came noon and they again proceeded to enjoy a snack, for appetites have a habit of growing rampant despite any lack of expenditure in the way of musular activity.

"I was jest thinkin," Perk remarked as they chewed their dry food, more as a duty than because they enjoyed it, "that we might be put on short rations if we're held up on this here job any great length o' time."

Jack refused to be disturbed by such a possibility.

"Oh! I reckon there isn't much chance of *that* happening," he said in his usual optimistic manner. "If things get pretty bad we can make a foray on the pantry of the shack where our friend puts up when over here. Knowing that he's fond of his grub, with oceans of the long green to lay in the best of supplies with, I rather think he keeps a well-stocked larder at all times. I don't figure on either of us being starved out while there's a flock of eatables close by," and from the way in which Perk licked his lips on

hearing this said, it was plainly evident he fully agreed with his pal.

After that wonderful sunrise, which even Perk had called glorious, the sky clouded up around noon and there were even signs to warn them that rain might come along by nightfall. The visibility, too, became somewhat poor which possibly was one reason that influenced Jack to make a certain decision which Perk heard later on with unbounded pleasure.

"It's getting on my nerves a bit, too, I must confess, Perk," was the way he started to state his case, "and since there would be small chance of discovery, thanks to this muggy atmosphere, what's to hinder our taking a little stroll, keeping a wary eye out for stragglers?"

"I get you, partner," was the eager way Perk snapped him up on the proposition which exactly tallied with what he himself had been wishing. "I calculate now it means we c'n move around an' get tabs on this here hideout o' the gent we're so much in love with, eh, what?"

"Wouldn't do any harm to learn the lay of the land," Jack told him, "especially since we mean to do most of our snooping under cover of night. So let's step out and take our little saunter. We know right well in a general way that the shack must lie down the shore, by that point jutting out a mile away. Let's hope we'll be able to run

across some kind of trail by following which we'll fetch up as close as we want to go for the first time. Both of us must make a mental map of everything we see so as to feel sure of our ground when darkness comes."

"That's the ticket, partner, let's go!"

Perk lost no time in picking up the small hand machine-gun, that could be used much after the fashion of a long barreled German Luger quick-firing pistol and when Jack looked dubiously at it his chum hastened to explain his reason for lugging such a weapon along.

"Huh! the weight don't count with such a husky as me, old hoss an' how do we know what's goin' to happen before we gets back here? These guys, I take it, are quick on the trigger and if we got to fight we'd have a better chance to pull out alive if we carried this little pill-box."

"Oh, well! have it your own way, brother," Jack told him, evidently impressed with Perk's logic; and so they started forth.

CHAPTER XX

DENIZENS OF THE FLORIDA SWAMPS

After all it was perhaps a wise determination on the part of Jack to thus take time by the forelock and endeavor to learn the lay of the land while a fitting opportunity lasted. To start out when darkness lay over everything, with no knowledge whatever concerning the prospect before them, would have doubled the chances for some grievous calamity overtaking them even before they were ready to strike their first blow.

Jack had a pretty strong suspicion they were in the neighborhood of some stretch of swampland —he was backed in this supposition by several things—the general low lay of the ground bordering the great lake and also the fact that snowy white egrets, as well as cranes, flew to and fro during the early morning, as though they must have a roost not far away and he had been told that as a rule these gathering places were to be found in the gloomy depths of a swamp.

If they should chance to lose their way in those dark and dismal swamps and find themselves mired in the mud holes, they would be in

a sorry fix, and they might even be forced to shout for assistance in order to save their lives, thus revealing themselves to their enemy, for the tenacious muck had a tendency to act in the same treacherous fashion as quicksand, clutching the victim and dragging him down, inch after inch into its unfathomable depths.

Hardly were they started than one pleasing discovery was made. Just as Jack had hoped might be the case, a dim trail was struck not far back from the border of the silent lake, that gave promise of leading them in the course they planned to go

Jack made certain that there were no signs of this trail having been used by human beings—at least in recent times; possibly it may have originally been an Indian trail in those days when Osceola and his gallant followers dared defy the powers at Washington and declare open war upon the few white squatters at that time in the southern portions of the Florida peninsula. Or, what was more probable still, it might be only the pathway used for ages by innumerable four-footed denizens of the swamp,—deer, panthers, raccoons, 'possum, foxes, wildcats and the like

It was a meandering trail, evidently following the path of least resistance for on both sides the shrubbery, together with wild grape-vines and

various other climbers, made a solid barrier that even a weasel might have found difficult to negotiate.

Presently their road skirted the border of the swamp Jack had felt so certain could not be far away Here new and wonderful sights greeted their eyes and Perk in particular stared with all his might, taking in the flowers that festooned many of the trees — palmetto, live oaks, wild plum, gumbo limbo, and queer looking cypress, with their cumbersome butts rising several feet from the ooze in which they grew. Most of the trees were festooned with long trailing banners of gray Spanish moss that gave them a most unusual appearance

Since it was Perk's first hand knowledge concerning the looks of a genuine Southern swamp, he felt justified in making frequent halts in order to gaze and wonder. Particularly was he impressed with the giant alligator that had been sunning himself on a half-submerged log and had slid off with a splash at their approach, also the multitude of water moccasins to be seen on stumps and other objects, looking most vicious with their checkered backs and dusty bellies.

"You want to take particular notice of those dirty looking boys," Jack told him in a low tone, pointing to a bunch of the reptiles as he spoke, "for they are water moccasins, cowardly enough,

but always ready to give you a sly stab and I've been told they are so poisonous that even if a man didn't die after being struck, his wound would never heal properly and his life become a burden to him. Give the critters a wide berth always, partner."

"Huh! you jest better believe I will, Jack—never did care much for snakes, even the harmless kinds an' I'd jump three feet in the air when out West, if ever I heard a locust buzz, thinkin' it must be a rattler. Me an' the crawlin' breed don't mix, that's what."

Hardly three minutes after Perk had given expression to his dislikes, Jack caught him by the arm and with a trace of excitement that was really foreign to his nature, pointed to some object close to the trail they were following.

"Jeru-salem crickets!" gasped Jack, possibly a bit louder than discretion would warrant but Jack felt there was some measure of excuse for his outburst.

There a monstrous diamond-back rattlesnake, fully five feet long and as thick through the body as a good-sized man's thigh, had just raised its enormous flat head and opened its jaws to display its terrible fangs. Even as the two stood there and stared, the rattle began to whirr its deadly warning.

"It's all right, Perk," said Jack soothingly, not

certain what the effect of so dangerous a neighbor might have upon his sensitive pal, "we can pass him by out of reach. A rattler, unless madly in earnest, never tries to strike further than his length for he has to get back in his coil in a hurry, being helpless to defend himself unless curled up."

Jack showed that this was true by passing the spot, with the venomous reptile only increasing his rattle and drawing back his head. Then Perk shut his teeth hard and followed suit but it might have been noticed that he kept to the extreme edge of the narrow trail and had his muscles all set, as if in readiness to make a mighty spring if he thought the snake was about to launch his coils forward.

"Whew!" hissed Perk, after he had safely negotiated the peril that lay in the road, "I'm a'thinkin' what risks we got to run tonight when we come a'snoopin' 'long this way. Nigh makes my hair curl to figure on that baby comin' slap up against my leg. Wish now I had my old leather huntin' leggings with me to ward off them terrible fangs, each one an inch long, seemed like to me."

"Between us, brother, I myself don't seem to hanker traveling along this trail after dark, and I mean to carry that small flash of mine, turning the light on every few seconds for I don't believe

it would be noticed. But they tell me these whoppers are rather scarce around these sections —there may not be another inside of five miles."

"Glory! I should hope not, said the still trembling Perk, "but I just can't forget we've got even one here to bother us. If only I dared use my gun, I'd soon knock spots out o' him, bet you a cookey, Jack."

"Nothing doing, so forget that, partner. On the way back, if he's still holding the fort, we might get a couple of long, stout poles, and try to knock him on the head if it can be done with little confusion—he won't make any noise outside of whirling his rattlebox and we could keep our lips buttoned tight. Yes, that would be the best way to fix things, I reckon."

Really Jack was saying this so as to comfort his mate; he realized that Perk had received a severe shock at sight of the diamondback crawler and it might affect his desire to do any prowling around after nightfall which would throw the entire burden of so doing on his, Jack's shoulders. Besides, there was a fair chance that the snake would have withdrawn from his self-imposed task of guardian of the swamp trail and taken himself off to other pastures.

They resumed their forward progress, with Perk keeping a watchful eye out for other lurking perils—how were they to know but that an

angry bobcat, bent on disputing this invasion of his tangled realm, might make a sudden spring from some limb of a live oak and land upon their backs to commence using his keen claws, tearing and stripping and snarling like a devil, such as these beasts always were reckoned in such sections of the country as he, Perk, had hunted.

Ten minutes, fifteen, passed then Jack again caught his chum's arm and with a finger pressed on his own lips to betoken the necessity for silence, pointed to something ahead that must have just caught his attention. And Perk, looking, saw a sight that afforded him a sense of satisfaction both deep and profound.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MYSTERIOUS COQUINA SHACK

"Hot Ziggetty! so *this* is where he dropped down, is it?" Perk was muttering in subdued excitement as his astonished eyes fell upon a plane bobbing on its pontoons in a sheltered little cove, "meet that spruce Lockheed-Vega bus, partner, that clipped past away over our heads, an' the woozy pilot never dreamin' our crate was within a hundred miles o' him. Kinder guess the pirate roost must lie around here somewhere."

"That's a dead sure thing, Perk," whispered Jack, "and chances are it's hid in the midst of that live-oak clump yonder, where I take it the land lies high and dry."

"I swan but this is gettin' real excitin' an' suits me okay," breathed the duly thrilled Perk, who felt there was no longer any reason for calling things tame.

"By changing our base a bit," suggested Jack almost as equally pleased over their success as his nervous chum, "we might even be able to get a squint at the shack, let's try, buddy."

He lost no time in creeping inch by inch along

toward the right, having apparently figured out that such a course would give them a better all-around opportunity to gratify their curiosity.

It proved to be a wise move for presently they managed to glimpse what seemed to be the corner of a small cottage, built of coquina rock and altogether attractive in appearance, proving that the Big Boss never hesitated to spend money when he could secure results.

"Huh!" gurgled Perk, stretching his neck so as to see better through the narrow opening that served them as a lookout, "some toney, strikes me, considerin' the desolate country round about this section. Must be his high-hat tastes foller him, no matter where he goes—sorter dude, I'd call him, partner."

"That may be," agreed Jack, "I understood he ran in that groove but just the same they say this Kearns is a real he-man an' can put up a warm scrap when necessary—the dude racket is only a thin veneer hiding the genuine article. I was warned never to let him get a chance to beat me to the draw — some call him a rattlesnake, only he lacks that reptile's honesty in always giving warning when about to strike. Don't forget, Perk, in dealing with this slick article you've got to be on your guard every minute of the time."

"Glad you told me that, Jack, I might a'been

fooled, an' treated him as a soft guy. Looky thar, will you, boy—two—three fellers jest swarmed out o' the shack an' gone into a huddle like they had some sorter game to set up. Wonder now if one o' the bunch could be *him!*"

"I reckon not, Perk," came in a low tone from Jack, whose head was only a few inches away from the other's, "none of them answer the description that was given to me. I even saw a snapshot taken of several society folks in front o' his Miami castle, with him standing in the center. One of this lot's the flying man connected with that crate — you can see he's still wearing his greasy dungarees and has his helmet on his head, like he expected to be hopping-off any minute now; a second chap is short and thick, not at all like the one we've come so far to buck up against, while the third, while tall, looks like a roughneck skipper of a speedboat."

"Guess you hit the nail on the head, Jack," muttered the convinced Perk, for they were at some little distance away from the consulting trio, and their whispers could never have been heard with the dead leaves on nearby palmetto trees keeping up their harsh clashing when whipped by the gusts of wind.

Both of the spies must have had a host of speculations passing in review through their active minds as they lay there watching the

conspirators so earnestly talking and gesticulating. From time to time Jack and his chum would cast further glances in the quarter where the trim aircraft lay anchored, bobbing up and down like a restive horse eager to be off.

What did they fetch on their voyage through the upper air lanes, coming from some unknown port—hardly "case stuff," Jack told himself, since space aboard the Lockheed-Vega crate would be limited—then it must be either yellow Chinks trying to crash the gates of the country that banned some of their race as undesirable aliens, or possibly the winged courier carried a batch of precious stones from far-away Paris, forwarded in a round-about, surreptitious way and intended to reach a ready market in the wealthiest country in the world, of course, without paying the usual heavy customs duty—which saving alone would likely reach well into six figures.

The trio seemed to have finished their discussion, whatever its nature might have been, for they sauntered down to the edge of the water where the man in the dungarees proceeded to embark by means of a small boat that he could leave secured to the mooring rope of the amphibian when he took off.

"Making off to pick up another cargo, I reckon," Jack ventured. "And so this is where

our friend has his secret hideout at such times when he so mysteriously disappears from his big show place near Miami? Mighty interesting, I'd call it and the chances are he's been keeping up this double play racket for many months, perhaps even for years, for he came to Florida not long after the war, fishing for tarpon down around the Ten Thousand Islands where we lay concealed lately."

"But what's the big idea, partner?" Perk wanted to know—"why under the sun does he play both ends o' this queer game—what's the sense o' his havin' this wee shack in the wilderness when he could carry on his racket just as well on the eastern shore?"

"Just because he fancies the idea of keeping his two personalities as far apart as possible, Perk. Uncle Sam's Coast Guards, revenue officers and even Secret Service men fairly swarm around Miami most of the year so they'd be apt to make it more or less unpleasant for the elegant Oswald Kearns in his society functions if he had his pals dodging in and out of his princely palace. He prefers to drop over here in this desolate place instead when he has a lot of business to transact. He's a wonder, all right, in his double line, Perk, and not to be underrated, understand."

"Seems that way, partner," grumbled the

other quickly adding, "there goes the Lockheed-Vega spinnin' out o' the lagoon to the open lake so's to get up enough speed for the take-off. Must be somethin' mighty special to coax that pilot to risk bein' seen in open daylight. So he used to fish in them passages 'tween the mangrove islands years ago, did he, Jack?"

"Sure did, and they told me his guide some years ago down there used to be a notorious smuggler and gulf-stream pirate, no other than Jim Alderman, right now in the jug over at Fort Lauderdale on the eastern shore and waiting to get a hempen collar for murdering three law officers in August two years back. Of course, he hadn't started his real career of crime when he used to be a guide for Roosevelt, Zane Grey, the writer, and some other famous sportsmen."

"Do tell," murmured Perk, duly thrilled by what his pal was telling him concerning one of the most turbulent characters known along the Florida coasts since those days of old when buccaneers like Blackbeard, Gasparilla and others of their ilk roamed the sub-tropical waters and swarmed aboard such unfortunate Spanish galleons as chance threw their way.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Jack went on to whisper, "if he goes under quite another name while over in this hideout and even manages to alter his looks more or less. He's capable of play-

ing many parts if he's half as good an actor as I suspect. But we'll be apt to know a heap more before a great while slips by."

"There he goes, Jack, swingin' off toward the east in the bargain, but then it's just as easy for a flier to strike across the lower end o' Florida, if the notion strikes him, day or night. Crates are gettin' to be a common sight these days down here. I read they expected to have a full hundred at Miami this very winter, takin' part in a big air derby that's scheduled to be pulled off."

They watched the other two men walk back and enter the coquina bungalow and a little later Jack was saying:

"Strikes me we'd better pull up stakes and clear out of this, Perk, don't forget we've got to pass that rattlesnake cove on the way back, and for one, I'm not so keen about doing it in pitch darkness."

"Don't get me goofy, partner," whimpered Perk with a shudder. "But hold on a bit—mebbe now somethin's a'goin' to strike up we'll both be sorter glad to set eyes on — looky there, old hoss, what do you see?"

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN OF MANY FACES

A man had come out of the odd-looking shack constructed from the coquina rock found in different parts of Florida, and formed by insects, science has decided. Neither Jack nor his companion had ever set eyes on him before, he was an entirely different personage from the short party and the longer-limbed man they had so lately been watching before the reckless pilot of the Lockheed-Vega plane departed toward the east.

This individual was also tall and was dressed in well-worn outing garments that gave him the appearance of a man of leisure taking a day off.

"Think that's this here Kearns, partner?" whispered Perk, eagerly.

"Just who it must be, Perk," came the cautious reply. "Be careful about making any sort of little move that might catch his attention, and keep your eyes fastened on him. Whatever under the sun is he doing, I wonder?"

"Looks to me he's got some sorter bird there—I c'n see red feathers—yep, that's what it is for a fact, Jack!"

"Working over a bird with red feathers," said Jack, as if to himself, so low was his voice. "Now, that makes me remember something I was told only a short time back—something connected with that wonderful place he owns over on the East Coast — about birds too — stuffed birds, in fact!"

"Do you mean he's got a collection there, Jack?" breathed the intently watching assistant in his companion's ear.

"Just that," came the ready reply, "a mighty fine collection too, from all accounts, of native Florida birds and filling a number of glass cases. We already know this party is a man of contradictory habits, being one thing among society people and just the opposite when he gets in a different atmosphere. Chances are he's a pretty fine amateur taxidermist—those birds have all been secured by himself and mounted in the bargain—that when he drops out of sight around Miami it's to come over here to do some hunting in the swamps and the Everglades, eager to run across some rare bird that he needs to make his collection complete."

"Now wouldn't that jar you?" he gasped, vastly astonished at hearing Jack air his conviction.

"I'm not much of an authority on rare birds," Jack admitted softly as he continued to use his

eyes to advantage, "but I've got a hunch that skin he's handling right now might be a roseate spoonbill—I'm sure it isn't a red ibis, for the bill seems different."

"Whee! sounds queer to me, I must say Jack—such a man, such a man—to play so many different parts! Say, d'ye know I kinder guess he ain't such a tough guy under all the varnish—must have a heap o' human natur' under it all to fall for such a decent game as taxidecentry or whatever you call this pluggin' dead birds an' makin' 'em sit up on boughs like they might be all to the good!"

"Put it mostly on that war experience he went through, Perk—they say once a man was gassed pretty badly over there, he'd always prove to be a queer fish—changeable, nervous and apt to do all manner of strange things."

"But see here, partner," whispered Perk, uneasily, "that ain't a'goin to make any perticular difference with our billet, is it — jest 'cause he's got this funny streak runnin' through his doin's we don't reckon to throw up our hands an' call it all off, do we?"

Jack chuckled.

"Not any, buddy—we only know that Uncle Sam wants his activities cut short—it may be exciting sport for him to ferry Chinks across from Cuba or Honduras, land big cargoes of

booze on our shores with his thumb to his nose insofar as the Government is concerned, and such capers as that, but it means heaps of trouble for the revenue boys as well as holding our laws up to contempt. He must be brought to book, and his game stopped without any more delay than is necessary, no matter how many other innocent recreations he's engaged in."

"Hot ziggetty! that gives me a warm feelin' again, partner an' I guess we're the boys to knock the underpinnin' loose so's to make him drop with a splash." Saying which, Perk relapsed into utter silence.

For some further time they stuck it out, watching every little movement of the remarkable character proceeding with his labor, not a hundred feet distant. Jack himself began to grow a bit nervous, for the sun was just hovering above the western horizon and twilight does not last any length of time in the South. If they delayed much longer it would mean a walk in the dark over that dangerous dimly marked trail.

They could have no further doubt concerning the nature of the work that was giving the suspected man so much genuine pleasure, he had held up the object of his labor several times so they could plainly identify it as a birdskin with the most lovely rosy-tinted feathery plumage, long legs and a spoon-shaped bill.

Then greatly to the relief of the uneasy Perk, the short man came out of the shack and said something that caused the other to accompany him back, thus clearing the field.

"Now let's skip out," Jack said softly.

Accordingly both watchers commenced sliding and creeping for all the world copying the movements of a cat ambushing a feeding sparrow in the back yard of a suburban place. Although so anxious to get started on their way back to where they had left their camouflaged ship, neither Jack nor his comrade would take chances in trying to make haste; they had long ago learned the folly of one false move when engaged in their accustomed job of spying upon a suspected law breaker whom they had tracked down after an arduous chase.

When finally they reached a point where it was safe to pick up a little speed, Jack hastened to do so. For a wonder Perk was not saying a word—the truth was he had his mind so filled with bewilderment in connection with the queer happenings of the last hour that he could not think of any further questions to ask his chum.

Then, too, Perk kept on the alert for any peril that might by chance lie in wait along the trail —there were other dangers besides that solitary rattlesnake that might suddenly crop up to give them a chill—how about those nasty looking

water moccasins that swarmed in the oozy swamp?—what of the ferocious bobcats such as were said to crouch on the lower limb of some tree close beside a woods trail, waiting to drop down on any moving object that came along?—yes, and other things just as creepy that his excited mind could readily conjure up?

They were, as Perk judged, about halfway to the spot where they had seen Mr. Rattler earlier in the day and the dusk was certainly beginning to make all objects look more or less dim, when Jack suddenly stopped, giving Perk quite a shock.

"Listen!" Jack was saying huskily.

A faraway and faint buzzing sound came to Perk's ears but instead of adding to his excitement it really seemed to cool his blood, for surely this had nothing whatever to do with snakes of any kind.

"Huh! must be a crate partner!" bubbled the relieved Perk.

"No question about that, Perk, and growing clearer right along, showing it's heading this way."

"Mebbe the Lockheed-Vega comin' back again?" ventured Perk.

"Hardly likely," he was told instantly. "For one thing you'll notice this motor racket swings

up to us from the southwest, while the other ship struck off toward the east."

"That's straight goods," Perk hastened to admit. "Funny I didn't get on to that right away. Means our gent has a raft o' ships comin' an' goin' when he takes a notion to drop over here once in a while."

"Well, we can't stop to listen any longer," said Jack again starting off with the other trailing close at his heels.

The buzzing grew rapidly in volume, proving that no matter where the advancing plane came from, its destination must be that secluded little cove close to the coquina shack sheltering the man of many faces, who went from fields of excitement to those connected with society functions, entertaining guests in royal style or following his favorite pursuit along the enchanting line of adding to his prized collection of Florida birds. Presently Perk heard a splash and knew the amphibian must have reached its goal.

CHAPTER XXIII

A PUGNACIOUS RATTLER

In good time they reached the narrow point on the animal trail which marked the scene of their adventure with the rattlesnake. Perk, wishing to be prepared for anything that might greet them, had picked up a stout cudgel with which he believed he could give a good account of himself should the occasion arise.

But they passed the place and he was beginning to breathe easier when he was thrilled by a brisk and ominous sound from just ahead. Instinctively Perk clutched his chum by the arm and dragged him back a pace although this was really unnecessary, since Jack had stopped walking at the same instant as Perk.

"Gosh all hemlock!" broke out Perk, "what d'ye think o' that—jest awaitin' round for us to come along—what a 'commodatin' little pet he is!"

Jack could see the suggestive bulk of the coiled snake lying on the path, with scant room on either side for them to pass—oozy depths of

the swamp on one side and an angry rattler on the other.

"Just blocks our game whichever way you choose to look at it, chuckled Jack with a shrug. "If we were monkeys, we could shin up a tree and climb over to that other one beyond, but since we're neither simians nor fox squirrels, we'll have to settle this thing some other way. Drop that club, brother—it's too short for this business by three feet. To try and use it on that chap you'd have to step up within range of his spring and before you could get in your lick it'd all be over."

"Jest as you say, partner," remarked Perk, throwing the stocky club away. "Wait up for me, Jack, an' don't let him skin out till I get back. I saw a stick just back a bit that ought to fill the bill okay."

Jack stood on guard and waited but not for long, since Perk speedily rejoined him, carrying a pole about eight feet in length and stout in proportion.

"Careful how you work it," advised Jack, who would rather have done the job himself but knew he would not be allowed by the ambitious one.

As Perk slowly advanced, waving his pole, the coiled serpent displayed signs of redoubled anger — louder buzzed his rattle while he drew

back his flat head as though in readiness for action.

"Hold it there, buddy!" snapped Jack. "Now get a firm grip on your pole and draw back for a vicious rap—you've got to get him square in the middle and follow it up with more whacks in a big hurry. Don't step any closer whatever you do. Now, give him fits, Perk!"

This the other proceeded to do with might and main. The sprightly buzz suddenly ceased as the great folds of the monster began to squirm and writhe — Perk lifted his pole and put in another blow for good measure.

"Huh!—guess now he's got his for keeps," gasped the victor in the singular duel as he managed to get in a third and deciding stroke that crushed the flat head of the reptile and forever ended its capacity for business.

They were soon bending over the still squirming snake, Perk eagerly measuring its length by footing it off and announcing it to be just one inch over five feet.

"Gimme just a minute so's to whip off that bully rattle, partner," he was saying as he produced a big pocketknife and opened its large blade. "I want it to show if any guy ever questions the truth o' my yarn 'bout these here Florida rattlers. There you are, an' now I'm ready to move on. But we got to keep our eyes peeled,

'cause I been told these critters nearly allers have a mate somewhere near by. An' I'm meanin' to hang on to this bully pole, since we got to come back this way more'n a few times, seems like."

Nothing else cropped up to disturb their peace of mind and in due time the pair arrived at the secluded lagoon where they had left their aircraft so artfully concealed. Apparently nothing had happened in this quarter since they started forth on their mission, and yet what strange things had they not seen inside those few hours.

"Seems like supper'd come in fair good jest new," Perk remarked after they had climbed carefully aboard and were once more comfortably seated in their accustomed places, "but sorry to say it's bound to be only a 'pology for real grub—dry fare and never even a drop o' water to wash it down with." And he emitted a disgusted grunt, as if to display a proper amount of displeasure over the doleful fact.

"I noticed a well of some sort just back of that shack," remarked Jack as if he too, shared in this moan over the absence of drinking water. "When we go back we'll try and snatch a drink apiece so as to take the rusty feeling out of our throats. Until then we'll have to put up with it, partner."

Necessity knows no law and so Perk was compelled to grin and bear it. Just the same, as they

were munching their simple fare,—and little of that in the bargain—Jack could hear him muttering to himself and chuckling from time to time as though he managed to squeeze more or less pleasure in simply mulling over a multitude of his favorite dishes until one would have imagined it was a waiter in a cheap eating joint down on the Bowery enumerating what the house offered for dinner—*a la* O. Henry.

Later on Perk gave signs of being what he called dopey, whereupon Jack asked whether he felt inclined to start out again or should it be left to just one of them—meaning himself, of course, —to undertake the further job of spying.

"Not much you don't monopolize the fun," Perk told him point blank. "I'm bound to step along with you even if there'd be a legion o' them rattlebugs lyin' in the trail awaitin' to sting us. When I get started on anything I gen'rally keeps right on with it, even if I have to wade through hell-fire. An' that goes, partner, see?"

"I knew you'd say that, brother," Jack assured him, seeing Perk act as though hurt by the insinuation that anything would tempt him to let his pal meet the danger alone. "If you feel a bit empty down below, just rub your tummy briskly, then pull in your belt a notch or two and it'll make you imagine you're full-up to the brim.

I'll be ready to start off inside another ten minutes."

Jack spent most of this time rummaging around in the locker where he kept his own personal belongings. Perk knew when he got out that little but valuable hand flashlight, by means of which they expected to be able to keep on the winding and narrow trail when heading once more toward the lonesome coquina shack on the border of the great inland sea.

"But I'm up in the air when it comes to knowin' what else he's stuck in his pockets," Perk told himself, though somehow he managed to refrain from asking questions nor did Jack seem anxious to enter into any explanations.

"We'll leave things here all fixed so as to make a quick take-off," was what the chief pilot remarked as they prepared to step ashore and while he did not see fit to offer any explanation with regard to just what he had in mind, Perk felt thrilled to believe there was already some daring plan taking form in his comrade's wide-awake brain that might be carried out if only the conditions seemed favorable, and the weather proved considerate.

As they walked slowly along Jack kept frequently snapping his light on and off so that they could take an instantaneous inventory of what lay just beyond their feet for the night

proved exceedingly dark although all that would be changed after a while, when the late moon climbed into sight.

Perk, just as he promised himself, had made certain to pick up that serviceable pole with which he had dispatched the rattlesnake and this he kept poking out ahead, as if to stir up any lurking reptile that might be lying coiled in the path.

His nervousness increased as they drew near the spot where the one-sided fight had taken place. He had apparently been brooding over the matter, wondering if the mate of his victim could have come upon the scene of the tragedy and sensing what had happened, was lurking thereabouts, bent on exacting a terrible revenge in payment for the untimely demise of her partner.

When he felt certain they had passed this particular narrow part of the trail, Perk began to breathe easier, but he soon had reason to fear lest he was crowing too soon for just then he felt Jack buck up against him and heard him saying in a low but distinct voice:

"Hold up and listen, partner!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ON HANDS AND KNEES

Even while Jack was saying those few words, Perk had recovered from his sudden alarm, since he already knew the reason for the other's bringing him to a halt.

"Huh! that crate's startin' off again, seems like," he muttered.

Indeed, it was a foregone certainty for the splash of water told the story as well as the abrupt explosions of a working motor. Then, too, these suggestive sounds all came from directly ahead.

Then Perk had another gripping fear which he imagined must have also seized his companion—that the chief object of their concern might be a passenger aboard that ship, heading once more across the state to Miami and that in consequence, all of Jack's carefully laid plans would meet the same untimely fate as befalls an ambitious soap-bubble when struck by a stray puff of air.

So they continued to stand there and listen to the telltale sounds with sinking hearts. Perk in

particular seemed to be dreadfully put out by this fresh upset and was grinding his strong teeth as though desirous of letting out an explosive but restrained by the fact of Jack being so close at hand.

"Gee whiz! this here is what I call tough luck, Boss," he grumbled, more because he hoped Jack might be able to dispel his fit of the blues in some way or other, having a much clearer vision than he himself possessed.

"Oh! I don't know, partner," said Jack in a wholesome, optimistic tone. "It looks a little dark, but just wait a minute or so before you croak—after all, the thing may not be so bad—it doesn't pay to jump at conclusions."

"Shucks! that's me all over, old hoss, but I'm sure glad to hear you say the last chance ain't snuffed out yet," mumbled Perk contritely, but at least he had gained his point which was to coax Jack to mix a little good cheer in with the gloom that had descended on his, Perk's soul.

"There, he's off! declared Jack as a significant change in the clatter so thoroughly understood by any airman announced the hop-off from the surface of the lake.

"An' nothin' happened to give him a spill, either," Perk went on to say and the disconsolate vein in his tone told plainly enough how he had been secretly hugging to his heart a hope that

the motor of the Lockheed-Vega crate might suddenly develop some fault, compelling the flight to be abandoned in its inception.

"Even that fact may yet turn out to be the best thing we could wish for," Jack told him confidently, being built on the order of a fellow who could see something to rejoice over in nearly every occurrence, no matter how thick the gloom surrounding it.

"There he swings up an' is off—a slick jump, b'lieve me an' that guy's some square shooter in the bargain—knows his business okay anyway. But Jack, tell me, you don't think he's got our man alongside him, do you?"

"Well, one thing seems to tell me that isn't a fact, Perk."

"Yeah, an' what might that be?" demanded the other quickly.

"Notice that he's already banking, so as to lay his course toward Cape Sable — square in the south—get that, don't you Perk?"

"I swan, but you're right there, Jack—which looks kinder like he didn't mean to strike out for Miami, don't it?"

"More than likely he's hitting out for Cuba, or if he veers to the west, it's Mexico or Honduras he means to head for."

Perk heaved a big sigh of relief.

"Hot ziggetty! but that sounds good to me,

partner," he observed with renewed animation as hope again sang a sweet song in his heart. "Then there's a real chance he ain't got our man alongside."

They stood there and continued to listen as the sounds made by the flight of the retreating sea-plane gradually grew fainter and even for brief spells died out altogether.

"He's out o' the pictur' anyhow," Perk finally commented when they could no longer catch the least thud of the working motor—only a more pleasing sound in the shape of gentle wavelets running up the shore of the great lake being borne to their ears.

"Yes, and since that's settled we'd better be making a further move ahead," Jack was saying, in his sensible way.

Accordingly the advance was renewed, nor did they take any less precaution because of the departure of the flying boat.

As before, Jack continued to frequently make good use of his little flashlight, which proved its worth just as had been expected. So speedy were the flashes that it did not seem possible for any one to notice them unless he chanced to be on the watch for something suspicious and Jack hardly anticipated such a thing as that.

Apparently the one who had planned the raid believed there was only one course for them to

pursue and that was to keep on as though everything was just as they had hoped. Even though an adverse Fate chose to cheat them them of their intended prey on this particular occasion there would be other days to come,—and had he not promised to trap his man as well as to procure all needful proof to secure his conviction?

They were soon drawing close to their goal—already Jack had glimpsed a shred of light gleaming through the intervening brush which proved most conclusively that the shack could not be wholly deserted.

"Good enough!" Perk whispered when this comforting fact had been brought to his attention, "we'll get his goat yet, partner."

Their progress was slowed up at this point for Jack no longer believed it good policy to make use of his flashlight. They had to partly feel their way along, using both hands and feet to detect the presence of any obstacle that was apt to cause them trouble.

Still, the night was long and there was no desire to make haste—if they waited until those in the shack were apt to be sound asleep it would be much easier to carry out their plan of campaign without any chance of interruption.

Now they could get faint glimpses of the little cove, which the visiting planes were wont to use

as a hiding place, taxiing thither after splashing down on the surface of the nearby lake.

Perk made a mental note of the fact that the cove was quite empty, no hostile crate bobbing up and down on the water — possibly this induced the dreamer to indulge in a hope that should the occasion warrant such a thing, they might taxi their own ship around and make use of that snug harbor safe from any ordinary gale that chanced to strike treacherous Okeechobee.

Now they could see the light much better and even make out that it came from a certain window of the coquina shack—up to then Perk acknowledged to himself that he had not known whether the modest little building boasted of windows or not, having discovered no evidence of their presence.

So, too, he now made out a certain dark spot just beyond the shack which he strongly suspected might be the well shed of which the more observant Jack had spoken earlier in one of their pow-wows.

Now that he found himself so near the spot where it seemed likely he could refresh his dry throat with a cup of fresh water, Perk was growing wild with the eager desire to be doing so. He wondered whether his companion could have forgotten his promise and even opened his mouth to remind him concerning it but thought better

of it for already Jack had changed the line of his advance and was beginning to steer his pal in the direction of the well.

In order not to take any unnecessary chances it was found that they must make a little detour in order to get past that shaft of light proceeding from the window in the rear of the shack. Perk even begrudged the brief time taken in making this half circuit, though recognizing the wisdom governing Jack's change of course. He dared not try to whisper now, lest his hoarseness cause him to make a sound so harsh and loud that it might be carried to hostile ears and be the cause of their undoing.

Then, after another delay when Jack imagined he had caught a suspicious little scratching sound, as of something moving, they drew up on hands and knees alongside what seemed to be a rustic shelter covering an opening with a real windlass, rope and all, to fill Perk's heart with joy in the belief that his throat was in a fair way of having its roughness relieved in short order.

CHAPTER XXV

PERK DEMANDS MORE WATER

It was queer what chanced to be passing through the mind of Jack Ralston while they were thus creeping toward the little well in the rear of the lonesome shack on the bank of Okeechobee. He had been reading a novel that was supposed to cover the famous and successful attempt on the part of General Fred Funston to penetrate the mighty wilderness in the north of Luzon, the main island of the Philippine group and effect the capture of the native rebel chieftain, Aguinaldo who, with some of his associates, had taken refuge in a lonely cabin at a most inaccessible point.

So vividly had the author described the manner in which the soldier and his companions crept up when making ready to seize their prey, that it was still haunting the mind of the airman and somehow the conditions just then confronting himself and Perk seemed to be very similar. He only hoped they would prove to be just as successful in their mission as Funston was when he carried Aguinaldo back to Manila, and thus

broke the backbone of the native uprising against the authority of Uncle Sam.

Perk was already reaching out toward the bucket he discovered perched on the rocky border of the well. Jack could hear him give a chuckle of satisfaction on finding it half full of water and felt himself a bit tickled to see the way in which his chum proceeded to greedily fill up with the precious liquid.

Little Perk cared if the water chanced to be stale—he had no complaint coming on that score as long as his parched throat and tongue came in for a good soaking and the choking sensation was immediately relieved.

Perk must have suddenly remembered his lapse of manners, for in the midst of his drinking spree he stopped short and stepped back as though to invite his comrade to take his turn.

This Jack showed no hesitation in doing, drinking long and with considerable ardor though he knew when to stop, which was what Perk did not for no sooner had the other released his hold on the bucket than Perk took another turn.

In the end Jack was compelled to almost drag the other away from the well possibly for fear he burst or else some one come out of the shack and discover them prowling there, unwelcome

intruders on Oswald Kearns' privacy and a positive threat to his peace of mind.

It was hardly a time and place for doing any talking, no matter how subdued their voices. Jack kept hold of the other's arm and thus started to steer him in the direction of the lighted window.

Perk must have guessed what his pal had in mind for he made no resistance whatever, just allowed himself to be steered as his comrade wished. Stooping down they crawled past, and then closer until they could begin to glimpse the interior of the room where the light was dispelling the darkness.

The first thing that struck Jack was the fact that the place had been fixed up with an eye to comfort — it looked almost luxurious with its easy chairs and imported rugs that must have cost a considerable sum. Evidently Oswald Kearns had been too long accustomed to comfort to deny himself such luxuries even when seeking seclusion in this out-of-the-way retreat.

Then Jack found himself looking upon the man who had for years been one of the greatest mysteries the Treasury Department at Washington had ever endeavored to trap. He was sitting in a big leather-covered easy-chair, smoking a cigar and busily engaged with a sheaf of im-

portant looking papers. From time to time he would refer to a volume that had the appearance of a ledger or account book and to which he seemed to attach great importance.

How the sight sent a succession of thrills through the whole being of the Secret Service sleuth — here he found himself within arms length of the master crook who had laughed to scorn all previous efforts of the Government to take him with the goods on.

Vainly had every possible attempt been made to catch him off his guard; he had proved himself to be too crafty for the best revenue officers put upon his track. And when failure after failure became the rule, the Big Boss had decided to change the policy they had hitherto followed and put an air pilot on the job as being able to go swiftly and easily where others had been so cleverly balked.

Then Jack began to wonder where the other two men might be, for thus far he had failed to discover either in the room of the lighted window. Could it be possible both of them had sailed away aboard that Lockheed-Vega ship, bent on some important mission which the Master had entrusted to their care?

He could not bring himself to believe this possible—that he against whom so many hostile

hands were raised would be willing to stay all by himself in such a lonesome place unless it seemed unavoidable. One or both of those aids must be somewhere around.

Just the same he could see no other room connected with the stone building — it was always possible, however, that there might be another shack—perhaps a crude palmetto-leaf hut, such as the poor whites in the backwoods lived in, somewhere not far away that served them for a shelter when it rained or a bustling Norther came howling down from the regions of snow and ice and zero temperatures.

Jack had about reached this conclusion when he discovered a figure, covered with a fancy Navajo blanket, on a cot in a corner of the place —yes, there was a head on a sofa pillow such as would be more in place over at the beautiful Miami estate than here in such a desolate region.

Somehow he quickly assumed this must be the shorter party — which would go to prove the other fellow might have accompanied the pilot of the departed airship.

When he had decided this to his entire satisfaction, Jack was able to figure on certain matters. It undoubtedly meant that he and Perk would have just two pitted against them in case

things came to a showdown, making it an even fight with victory perching on the side that was quickest at the draw.

He seemed to remember every warning he had received in connection with not underating this remarkable man, so greedy for excitement that wealthy though he was, he would seek all manner of thrilling adventures just to have the laugh on the Government, especially the Secret Service men toward whom he was said to entertain a feeling of almost wolfish hatred.

So too, did Jack take note of every object spread before his searching gaze in the shack where Oswald Kearns seemed to be busying himself in the pleasing occupation of making up his secret accounts.

That book, as well as the sheaf of papers rather fascinated the watcher outside the window—somehow Jack conceived the idea that there before him was spread all the incriminating evidence needful to bring the erratic career of this amazing man to an abrupt end—to put a stop to the mammoth illegal operations he had so long conducted in secret and by which he had impudently flaunted all the powers in Washington, just as though he had sent them a message worded, "Well, what are you going to do about it? Break up this fine game if you can."

If only they were able to get him fast in the net before he could make any attempt to destroy that book and those papers—Jack felt convinced a generous Fortune had not allowed him to see such a prize only to snatch it out of his reach through fire or some similar means of destruction.

But here was Perk pulling at his sleeve as though he had a communication of the utmost importance to pass along. Accordingly, Jack, who himself was ready to effect a change of base so that speedy action might be decided on, moved back from the window.

"What is it, Perk?" he whispered, at which the other began to make suggestive gestures toward his throat, and nod his head violently.

"I c'n feel it comin' on again, partner — the ticklin' feelin' you know, an' I'm afraid I'll start acoughin' to beat the band — must have more drink."

It seemed nothing could be done until Perk's sensitive throat had been properly attended to, so once more they crept and trailed along until the vicinity of the well had been reached. Here Perk started to swill, as though his capacity for holding water had no limit. It was just at this particular moment, when both of them were hanging over the well curb that a shaft of light

suddenly enveloped them as the back door of the shack opened and the figure of the short man came in sight with a new tin or aluminum bucket in his hand as though his purpose was to get a supply of fresh water.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FIGHT AT THE WELL

"Gosh!"

Perk hissed this one word even as he ducked down behind the well curbing at sight of the figure in the doorway. Jack was not a breath behind him, both acting through mere intuition or instinct.

Whether they had been seen was the important question flashing through the mind of each. There was no sudden outcry which seemed a favorable sign, Jack decided and the short, muscular man was even then emerging from the interior of the shack, evidently bent on replenishing the drinking water supply.

Perk thrust his eager hand into the pocket of his leather jacket to grip his automatic with the idea that he would be needing it before many more seconds had ticked off. In his mind he entertained a comprehensive view of what their plan of action would most likely be—to down this husky chap, either by means of a blow or else a bit of lead delivered where it would do the

most good—then a swift rush into the shack and crushing the ex-war veteran before he could fully grasp the meaning of it all.

Easy enough to figure it out after this manner, but there must be considerable chance that matters would not work so smoothly. For one thing it must be considered that Oswald Kearns was no weakling, but a more or less athletic figure, accustomed to feats of strength and agility beyond the measure of an ordinary man. Then, too, he was known to be irrational, even to the length of being considered dangerous when thoroughly aroused and it went without saying that he must always be well armed for in his reckless way of living he must many times be in close touch with desperate characters, some of whom might conceive it worth while to plot against his liberty, with a heavy ransom in their mind's eye.

It was quite too late for either of them to think of slipping off, since the light from the interior of the shack poured through the open door and dissipated the friendly darkness in that especial vicinity.

Consequently all they could do was to continue to crouch there in the shadow of the well curbing, and await whatever was scheduled to come to pass.

If Perk had been so eagerly praying for something to breeze along that would give him the thrill he loved so well, his wish seemed well on the road of being realized since everything was set for a dramatic discovery with its attendant speedy action.

It was apparent that after all the man could not have glimpsed their vanishing faces as they ducked so swiftly, for he continued to advance in the direction of the well and Perk could hear him softly singing, just as though he might be a "musical cuss," as Perk told himself with one of his customary chuckles since his first stab of alarm had passed off under the realization that they had another chance.

Jack, too, was telling himself what a peculiar state of affairs had come upon the stage—here, with an ambush lying in wait before him, this man could step blithely along, swinging his aluminum bucket and softly warbling one of the most recent hits from a comic opera—Jack had himself heard the song on the boards of a great metropolitan theatre in New York — had even caught himself whistling the catchy air more than a few times since.

The man who seemed to be so well pleased with his fortunes while basking in the favor of the wealthy chief of smugglers had a little surprise waiting for him at the end of his rainbow

—if those lurking shadowy figures knew their business and managed it as they should, he would be singing quite a different air before a great while, perhaps interlarding his humming with a choice variety of expletives concerning the cruelty of Fate.

A few more steps and he would have reached the well—then what must take place? Perk was asking himself as he crouched there, his muscles set and his breath coming in little noiseless gasps —he resembled nothing so much as a cat ready poised to make a deadly leap upon a fat robin struggling with a worm that it had pulled halfway out of its hole.

There was not one chance in twenty that the man could actually reach the well, drop the bucket down, switch it around in order to induce water to enter and then make use of the windlass so as to draw it to the top, without discovering the presence of those two huddled forms; so Perk did not deceive himself in the least with any extravagant hopes of the affair passing off smoothly and their plans being uninterrupted.

Now the man had set his pail down and was giving the well bucket a switch as though intending to dislodge any stale water it might contain. From this little incident Jack understood that undoubtedly the man must himself have left the water they had used up in the bucket

when last at the well and subconsciously remembered the fact.

He went about the job of lowering the rope with the manner of one quite familiar with the necessary movements, pulling the rope from the barrel of the windlass hand over hand. Then there came a splash, a gurgle and following these symptoms of success the man, with a jerk at the rope, managed to sink the bucket.

Next he started to turn the handle in order to fetch the bucket to the top of the well. In order to get a better purchase on the handle, he took a step to the left, and as luck would have it, struck his knee against the crouching form of Perk.

Then came a quick look downward, since he was naturally curious to know what sort of object he had collided with — possibly he may even have had a sudden suspicion it would turn out to be some native beast from the neighboring swamp—possibly a panther, since such animals had been known to frequent the western shore of Okeechobee as a hunting-ground in days gone by.

Of course he instantly made a startling discovery, since there was enough light to show him the form of a man doubled up against the rocky well curbing.

It would have been instinctive for the man to have let out a yell on making this discovery but

he did not have the chance to give tongue, at least fully, for Perk made a lightning-like spring and had both hands clasped about his throat, effectually throttling the intended shout so that it emerged only as a queer sound, rather on the order of a bull alligator's bellowing suddenly cut short.

That was but the beginning of the affair as Perk knew only too well it must prove to be. He found he had a tough proposition on his hands for the man struggled desperately, as who would not on finding his wind suddenly cut entirely off with a pair of iron-like hands pressing his throat as though it were gripped in a vise?

Jack sprang up, ready to lend his pal any necessary assistance if only the opportunity showed itself. Just then all he could make out in the dim light was a whirling set of wildly struggling figures, looking for all the world like one of those teetotums children delight in spinning—only on an exaggerated scale.

Then they went down with a crash, first one on top and then the other in rapid succession. It would have made an excellent picture for the silver screen, Jack could not help thinking while he drew his automatic and kept tabs on that open door, more than half expecting to see Oswald Kearns dash wildly out with some sort of machine-gun in his hands, ready to take a

chance in the game, knowing that the attack must have everything to do with his own safety.

Perk seemed to be hanging on with the tenacity of a bulldog, for not another peep did the wolfish man, whose throat he squeezed, give vent to as the slam-bang fight continued. It was lucky indeed there chanced to be a raised wall about the well or in their frantic staggering this way and that the wrestlers might have plunged down into the yawning aperture, much to their mutual discomfiture—as it was they smashed up against the curbing several times, to emit grunts at the rough contact.

Finally, Jack, to his relief, saw Perk slam his now weakening adversary to the ground and immediately follow this up by sending in a number of furious blows that took every atom of fight out of the unfortunate chap who collapsed as if wholly done for.

Perk himself was far from fresh—his breath came in gasps and he must have been trembling in every joint from the tremendous exertion put forth but as always, victory was sweet in his nostrils and after assuring himself that nothing further need be feared from the man he had downed, he struggled to his feet, and ranged himself alongside Jack, as if to declare his readiness to fight it out along those lines if it took all night.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT BAY

Jack had been keeping a watchful eye on the nearby shack, not knowing what moment a raging figure might come dashing forth armed with a rapidfire gun and ready to sweep up the earth with the mangled bodies of himself and Perk.

Somewhat to his surprise, and greatly to his relief as well, nothing of the kind came to pass. Suddenly he realized that the door of the squatty little coquina rock building had been closed, for no longer did the light spread a banner out into the black night.

"Drag him back of the well here, Perk," he said softly, "we've got to make certain he'll give us no further trouble. Got that piece of stout rope I gave you?"

"Right here, partner — wrapped around my waist," and as he thus managed to make himself heard, even while so short of breath, Perk caught hold of the nearest leg of his late antagonist and without the least ceremony dragged the senseless man several feet just as he might a bag

of meal—when head-over-heels in a real scrap Perk counted his opponents as so much junk whose fate it was to be handled without ceremony and yet after the row was over, no one could be more solicitous about binding up their hurts than Gabe Perkiser.

"Use the rope to fasten his ankles together," advised Jack, standing guard meanwhile with his automatic ready for business and his keen eyes roving around in search of signs along the trouble line, and knot it half a dozen times so it would take a knife blade to get free."

"All done up brown and slick, Jack old hoss, now what?" announced Perk a minute or so later.

"Clap that new pair of bracelets on his wrists," further explained the head pilot briskly, "and be sure to frisk him for a gat or even a knife. You see, we're going to have our hands full with the boss and can't fool around with this chap any longer."

"His name is Mud!" scornfully declared Perk briskly as he completed his task with the manner of one to whom it had become an old story.

The fellow, it seemed, had recovered his senses for he tried to bite Perk's hand and received a solid thump on the head for his pains.

"So far, good," Jack was saying, half to himself. "Now let's move along to the house and

make sure our bird hasn't skipped out while we were so busy at the well here. Got all the drink you want, Perk—we can't be coming back every little while just to wet your long neck!"

"It's okay with me, boy, let's go," the other announced with a chuckle.

Leaving their prisoner lying there they started an advance on the shack. Both eyed it carefully as they crept along and it was Perk who noticed the first favorable sign.

"Door's shut, partner, but the light's still on —you c'n lamp a streak down near the sill. think he's on deck yet—ain't cut an' run like a blue streak?"

"We'll soon find out," Jack assured him. "'Twouldn't be like a guy with his reputation as a scrapper to clear out so quick. I'm wondering whether he's fixing up some hot reception for us when we break in."

"Hot ziggetty! that is sure some rummy scrap," Perk muttered as he kept close tabs on the shack now close by as though he more than half anticipated seeing it suddenly burst into flames, or go up in fragments under the influence of an explosion.

Now they had reached the door and Jack made a slight effort to open it, but with no success.

"No use," he whispered to his kneeling mate,

"it's got the bar down in place. Listen and see if you can catch a sound from inside."

A minute passed with both straining their hearing to the utmost—Perk even laid his head against the closed door so as to better catch any suspicious sound from within.

"Huh! guess they ain't nothin' doin', partner," he hissed in a disappointed tone, "thought I did get a little ruslin' sound, like paper bein' crumpled up when you're a'makin' a fire, but don't hear it no longer."

"Paper, you say?" snapped Jack uneasily, "I don't like that any too much,"

"Why not?" asked the other, evidently at a loss to understand why such a simple little thing like that could annoy any one—what if the man at bay figured on setting fire to the hidden little retreat he had arranged here close to the lonely lake where he could slip away whenever he felt like shunning those society people over at crowded Miami—he surely had no intention of cremating himself and they could nab him if he started to make off.

"Paper—don't you know what he was doing when we peeped in—that book ought to be worth its weight in gold to us as evidence and that stack of papers that he was looking through—if he's given enough time he may put a match to the bunch and destroy everything that could be used

against him. We've got to keep him from doing that, brother."

"Yeah—but how?" gasped the other, showing renewed signs of excitement as he visioned the holocaust with their fine plans going up in fire and smoke just when they seemed about to corral success.

Jack answered that question by striking the door with his foot, the result being a loud thump. Then he caught hold of his chum and dragged him to one side. None too soon was this done, for there came a series of staccato explosions from inside the shack and tiny gleams of light in various sections of the door told that bullets had passed through the wood in a number of places. Only for this prompt action on the part of the cautious one, either or both might have had leaden pellets lodged promiscuously about their persons with resultant painful sensations.

"Wow! that was what I'd call a close shave," whispered the kneeling Perk as he surveyed those suspicious holes in the badly riddled door, all on a line with any crouching human figure without.

There could no longer be any doubt as to the warlike intentions of the man they had at bay, his fighting spirit, first fed during those bloody days and nights in the Argonne, had burst into flame again and he shed his free and easy

character as the lord of that wonderful palace at Miami to assume the rough and ready type of an adventure-loving smuggler chief, quick to defy all authority while the red blood rioted in his veins.

"We've just got to keep him on the jump," Jack was saying, "so's to occupy his attention and keep him from putting a match to those papers and that priceless account book with its addresses. Here, find a way to get in a smash or two on the door, like we meant to break in—I'll slip around and see what can be done at the window."

"Jack, I 'member there's a log a'lyin' right over there—why couldn't I use that an' really break through?"

"Too dangerous, buddy—he'd turn that terror of a machine-gun on and wipe us off the map. Do what I'm telling you, only keep back so he can't get you when he shoots again."

"Just watch my smoke," grunted Perk, stooping to feel around for some object that could be made available for the purpose of a door knocker.

"Wait," he heard the other saying as he was starting to move off. "Here's a little pile of rocks—pick up one and toss it on the roof of the shack — make him think we're climbing up, meaning to break in that way—anything to keep

him so busy dodging and firing he'll have no time to start that blaze."

Perk grasped the main idea, which was to fight for time — given even half a chance, he knew his pal would find some way to accomplish the end he had in view which was to take Kearns a prisoner with enough positive evidence of his guilt to convict him when placed on trial in a Federal court.

Hastily then did Perk scramble for the rocks mentioned by his companion—it was much too dark for him to see where they lay, but he used his common sense with such signal success that almost immediately he found what he sought.

To toss up a good-sized rock with such vim that it came down on the roof with a loud bang was the work of a few seconds. Hardly had the crash sounded than Perk had another missile on its way and as long as the pile held out he meant to keep up a continual fusillade that would have the man inside guessing.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE COMEBACK

It was more or less fun for Perk to keep up that bombardment as long as he had any ammunition left—the heavy thumps on the roof continued to follow each other, like blasts in a quarry or an admiral's salute when the "old man" took a notion to come aboard.

So, too, would each concussion be followed by a spurt of gunfire from behind the closed door of the shack showing that Oswald was alive to the situation and must be enjoying his share in the strange engagement quite as much as the fun-loving Perk did his part.

If the little rock pile held out and there were enough ammunition belts for the machine-gun handy, the chances were that the roof of the bungalow would assume the nature of a sieve and leak when the next heavy rain storm set in.

Perk was fully aroused now, and awake to his part of the bombardment — his mind began to figure just what other means lay within his reach to continue engaging the attention of the rat in the trap after the last rock had been fired.

Some of them he knew had rolled off the slightly sloping roof after accomplishing their duty. If only he could lay hands on them they might be made to serve again but the darkness would make this problematical. There was that log he had mentioned to Jack—with it he fancied he might do something to keep up the feverish interest in the game and hold Oswald's undivided attention.

What added more or less to the thrill he was enjoying was the fact that at any minute the ready marksman inside might succeed in reaching him with a bullet fired at some new angle. Jack had told him how Kearns was said to be quite a wizard at making bullseyes in a flying target either with a pistol or a rifle.

He was still going heavy although nearing the end of his ammunition, when something not on the calendar came along, something so unexpected that Perk was taken quite by surprise. A weighty and metallic object struck him on the head with such violence that he saw a million stars all at once, as though a myriad of rockets had exploded simultaneously high in the air.

He went down like a stone, his senses reeling under that frightful impact and yet half conscious of the fact that some one must have come up behind him in the darkness and struck him with a heavy weight.

Now he could feel hands groping about his person as though seeking to find where to follow up that first blow with another that would effectually wind up his career for keeps.

Rendered desperate by the nature of his situation Perk threw up both hands and chancing to come in contact with a human form, closed in with what might almost be called a death grip —his one object being to thus hold the unseen enemy close and prevent him giving a second blow that would be in the nature of a knockout.

He met with fierce resistance, but no matter how desperately the other struggled and fought he was unable to break Perk's terrible hold, so like that of a fighting bulldog, once its teeth have closed for keeps.

There the two antagonists rolled to and fro, striving in turn to get on top, only to be overturned in rotation. What made it all the more exciting was the fact that the man in the shack, hearing all those queer noises, must imagine his enemies were trying to burrow under the door for he kept up frequent furious bursts of gunfire and at any moment an unlucky roll was apt to bring the wrestlers within range of the hail of bullets.

One thing favored Perk—he was by degrees getting over the deadening sensation following that frightful blow on his head—apparently the

other was weakening in the same proportion that Perk was gaining strength, showing that he must have been in anything but prime condition when the tussle started.

It was this potent fact that gave Perk his first inkling as to the identity of the man with whom he struggled. At first he took it for granted the fellow was the tall confederate they had noticed with Kearns during the late afternoon, and who had perhaps been away and returned to the shack just at this interesting moment to find it in a state of siege.

He had hardly begun to get an inkling as to the true state of affairs when one of his hands, in seeking to get a firmer hold, chanced to come in contact wtih something cold and hard. Then he understood just why his antagonist seemed to be so handicapped in the scramble — he could stretch his hands apart only so far—they were apparently held fast in some mysterious fashion.

It burst upon Perk like a bomb from a sky chaser—why, after all this was an old friend of his, one whom he had only recently been hugging with all his might and main—in fact no other than the short confederate of Kearns whom they had left beside the well but a brief time previously.

In some manner, which was a complete mystery to Perk, he had managed to get his legs

free from that binding rope which had been wound around and around his ankles in many coils and then knotted half a dozen times. Perk found it hard to realize this puzzling fact, but just the same he knew it must be the truth.

He proceeded to continue his rolling process with additional vim, partly because he now knew the other could not get a chance to whack him again with both hands handcuffed—for that was what had actually occurred and it proved his first surmise—that hard metal had come in contact with his cranium.

Presently it came about that Perk was enabled to clutch the throat of his antagonist and for the second time close his fingers on his larynx, shutting off his wind completely and causing history to repeat itself.

The fellow gave up immediately, thus hoping Perk would diminish that paralyzing grip which the other condescended to do. When this had been carried through Perk made up his mind not to trust to a rope again—in the first place he had no rope and even if this were not the case he had for the time being lost all confidence in ropes as restraining agents.

He remembered he had a second pair of steel bracelets in one of his pockets, having fetched two pair along with the idea they might have to

include some pal of Kearns' before finishing their job.

He quickly had the fellow lying inert and acting as though he did not have another bit of fight left in him. Managing to pull out the handcuffs, Perk first tested them for size, and finding he could snap them shut after circling the ankles of his prisoner he did so with a vim. This would effectually prevent the man from getting any distance away, since he could move his feet only a few inches at a time at the best.

Perk struggled to his feet, feeling more or less dizzy. His first natural act was to put a hand to his head, and feel it gently, in order to ascertain the character and extent of his injuries. There was a cruel lump on his crown and he knew blood was streaking his face but on the whole he did not believe he was very badly hurt—perhaps after the double beating the other fellow had received at his hands he was worse off than Perk—an idea that started the latter chuckling, even if the act caused him a sudden dart of pain that made him wince.

Then he remembered what was going on, knowledge of which had been knocked out of his head by the unexpected fight that had taken place. How about Jack?

He dimly remembered hearing further shots from behind the barrier, although unable to

decide whether the bullets continued to break through close to the bottom of the door or otherwise. Could this later fire have been directed at Jack, who had unwisely exposed himself at the side window?

Perk was strongly tempted to disobey orders and hasten around the corner in order to learn the worst. If that daredevil inside had hurt his pal he would be mad enough to find some way of blowing up the shack and the gas-mad ex-soldier along with it, regardless of consequences. He only waited long enough to run his swollen hands over the recumbent figure of the man in irons so as to make sure he could not play the same mean trick a second time. Finding everything fast, he turned away from the scene of his recent ruction, and hurried around the corner of the shack, bent on backing up Jack or, in case his pal had been placed out of the running, to avenge his injuries without delay.

CHAPTER XXIX

A LAST RESORT

Meanwhile how fared Jack in his share of the attempt to corner the defiant and persistent law-breaker?

He had crept around the corner after leaving his chum, fully convinced that some sort of heroic measures must be brought to bear on the ugly situation if they hoped to succeed.

One thing had already been amply proved—this was the unmistakable fact that Oswald Kearns must be having one of his occasional brain sprees, the result of his wartime gassing when he was apt to tip over his balance and for the time being imagine himself beset by a myriad of bitter foes whom it was his duty, as well as privilege, to mow down, regardless of everything. Acting under this delusion he was doubtless resting under the belief that these were Hun machine-gun squads secreted in nests in the Argonne and that he was duly recruited by Heaven to round them up, disseminate their number, and fetch a goodly bunch into the American lines as prisoners of war.

His readiness to shatter the door of his own lodge was evidence of his obsession, Jack firmly believed and from which he deduced the opinion that as long as his equipment held out he was ready to keep up that hot bombardment under the belief that the enemy were falling like dead leaves in the frosts of late Fall.

This being the case, Jack understood how exceedingly careful he must be not to expose even the tip of his nose, since everybody said Oswald was a most wonderful hand with firearms.

No sooner had he turned the corner of the rock shack than he made a discovery that gave him some satisfaction. At least the man inside had not considered it necessary that he extinguish the lamp for there was a certain amount of light coming from the window — only tiny lances, showing that some sort of shade had been drawn down as far as it would come.

So Jack crawled hastily forward, bent on taking a peep if it could be accomplished without too much risk. Having gained a position directly under the window, he considered just how he must go about it and so discovered that a plant of some sort—perhaps a young orange tree, was growing alongside the shack.

Taking hold of a sprig, he gently moved it across a portion of the opening and on finding it attracted no attention from within he next

pushed his head up with the bunch of green foliage.

This resulted in giving him a quick survey of the interior—he could see what had come before his vision on his previous survey but at first he failed to discover any human presence. The fact gave him a feeling of chagrin, under the impression that Kearns might in some mysterious way have been able to quit the rock house without being discovered and that they had been outwitted.

In that brief period of time Jack seemed to glimpse all manner of strange tunnels leading from the secret retreat of the smuggler to certain exits back in the pine woods, craftily constructed for just such an emergency as had now come to pass.

Then he suddenly changed his mind on realizing how next to impossible it would have been to construct such underground exits when the near presence of great Okeechobee would make digging quite out of the question, since water must of necessity seep into any such passage and fill it full.

Jack, looking further, had just managed to discover a leg that was thrust into view when Perk's first rock crashed on the roof, making a terrific noise. Following this came a burst of

gunfire with the acrid powder-smoke filling the room and making seeing next to impossible.

Jack crouched down to do a little thinking as well as listen to the exchange of compliments between the warring forces—every loud detonation as a lump of coquina rock fell on the roof would be followed by its complement of rapid gunfire, just as though the man at bay was bound to keep up his side of the battle even if he had to create a shortage in his ammunition supply.

It was fierce work, yet bordering on the ludicrous, Jack told himself, meanwhile wondering just how long Perk's heap of missiles would persist, also what was bound to happen when the rock pile was gone. Doubtless the near-demented man inside must be working up to a feverish pitch under the impression that he was specially designed by Providence to annihilate the whole German army and open a clear path to an Allied march all the way to Berlin!

Then silence came—a silence that seemed to brood over the scene of hostilities as might a sea fog drifting in along the coast and baffling the most skillful of flyers.

Jack had discovered a stick that was some three feet in length and remembering an old and often tried trick known to frontiersmen away back in the Kentucky days of Daniel Boone, he meant to try it out in order to see if the ammuni-

tion of the besieged man had run out on him or not — something that was really essential he should know before proceeding to extremes and breaking into the fortress that was holding himself and Perk so peristently at bay.

Removing his leather cap with its dangling earlaps, he perched it on the point of his stick and proceeded to elevate the contrivance so that it might be seen by the vigilant eyes within.

The result was all that he could have asked, showing that this venerable Indian trick was just as workable as in the days of old.

A single shot sounded dully within the shack —there was a tinkling sound as if a speeding bullet had bored a hole through a pane of glass and down fell his helmet. Jack picked it up and chuckled to find he could poke an investigating finger through a hole that had certainly not been there before. What great luck his head had not been inside that helmet, he was telling himself on thus learning the wonderful accuracy of the marksman.

Things were again at a standstill, for as long as the half demented Kearns was able to make such excellent use of his firearm it would be suicide for either of them to try and break into the shack.

One thing Jack had managed to discover with that brief peep back of the friendly bunch of

orange leaves—there was a little heap of papers in the fireplace, also the precious book he yearned to possess—yes, and he could even make out a smudge as though a match had been used to start a conflagration but owing to some puff of contrary air the blaze had fizzled and gone out —an especially providential favor in their behalf Jack had told himself.

Still, at any moment now the man with the crooked mind was apt to notice how his purpose had been baffled. Then he would make a second and possibly more successful attempt to destroy all incriminating evidence as to his connection with the smuggling of rum, aliens and precious stones into the country, contrary to the laws of the land.

What could he do should this crisis come upon him, Jack was asking himself as he crouched there and counted the minutes passing by? There was only one means for counteracting such a move on the part of the enemy and Jack had already convinced himself the occasion was fully ripe for it to be tried out.

On a previous occasion the same thing had handily proved its efficacy, so why not again? Desperate cases require desperate remedies, he kept telling himself as he groped in his pocket and extracted some small object therefrom, holding it tightly clinched while he again moved the

orange leaves across the lower part of the window without extracting a shot from the guardian of the shack.

Then he nerved himself to take a look and received a shock for he was just in time to see Kearns down on his knees striking a match which he hastened to apply to the crumpled papers.

Seeing there was not a second to waste, Jack proceeded to hurl the tear bomb he had been holding in his fist straight through the glass, so as to strike against the stone chimney and be shattered, releasing its powerful contents that would almost instantly fill the room and blind the man whose fingers held the burning match.

CHAPTER XXX

FETCHING IN THEIR MAN

There was now no further need for caution.

Jack saw the man inside stagger to his feet, drop his gun and throw both hands up to his face —he was starting to rub his eyes as though they had already commenced to feel the terrible effect of the pungent acid that would start the tears flowing in streams and render him temporarily blind before he could exercise his brain sufficiently to unbar the door and rush outside.

But already that tiny blaze on the open hearth was increasing, and would presently gain such headway as to threaten the utter destruction of the precious papers that they had come so far and braved all sorts of dangers to get. Something must be done instantly in order to prevent this threatening catastrophe.

So Jack, always quick to act, with one smashing blow sent the entire window sash flyiing into the room. He did not even stop to learn whether he had cut himself, but gave an upward spring, gained a precarious knee-hold on the window-sill and allowed himself to fall inside the room

with its unseen gas contents which would of necessity act upon his eyes even as it already had done in the case of his intended prey.

Across to the fireplace went Jack—he could never tell just how he made that trip of a dozen feet with his sight already growing dim and his senses commencing to reel, but he knew that he started to stamp out every atom of those greedy flames, working like one possessed.

Then he clutched the reeling man by the arm and dragged him across to the window and bundled him out with as little ceremony as if he had been a sack of oats.

Blinded himself by this time and hardly knowing what he was doing, Jack managed to climb through the opening and drop down on top of the writhing figure on the ground.

Here Perk found them both as he came full tilt around the corner, realizing something not down on the bills as far as his knowledge went, must have taken place.

"Jack—what's happened—are you bad hurt, buddy?" Perk demanded excitedly as he bent down over his chum.

"All right—only had to use the tear-gas again—be better right off—don't let Kearns get away on your life!"

"Hot ziggetty! you jest bet I won't old hoss!" whooped the delighted Perk as he squatted

alongside the still writhing Oswald, his automatic held in readiness only waiting for Jack to recover enough to take things in charge.

"Look in the room—see if the papers are safe—in the fireplace—he started to burn the whole batch and beat us to the scratch—had to give him the whole works to save 'em!"

Thus enlightened, Perk stood up and took a look then burst out in a joyous shout that would have done credit to any cow-puncher on earth.

"It's all dandy, Jack—papers safe an' we got our man ditto. Mebbe now I'll soon get a chance to treat my tummy to some decent grub, 'cause my ribs're stickin' to my backbone, I'm that empty."

Before long Jack's eyes ceased to sting and his vision once more became almost normal. By then, too, Kearns had come to his senses, with Perk keeping him subdued by means of prodding a weapon in his ribs.

Jack hunted around and found some rope with which they temporarily bound the arms and ankles of their prisoner. That accomplished he made haste to secure all the papers as well as the ledger which Kearns had been so eager to destroy when realizing that at last his scorn for the minions of the law had reaped its inevitable result—the pitcher gone once too often to the well—and that his game was up.

"What next, Boss?" Perk was asking, "mean to kidnap both o' these guys Jack?"

"It'll make our chances better with one showing a yellow streak and turning on his employer for State's evidence," was Jack's quick rejoinder, the idea being quite to Perk's liking as he speedily made manifest.

"Jumpin' jimcracks! we c'n tote the pair right nifty an' I'm meanin' to see that other guy gets all that's comin' to him, after that nasty crack on the coco he gimme with them irons. Say Jack, take a look at my head an' see if it's sound still—gee whiz! but it felt like the sky'd gone an' dropped down on me."

Jack speedily reasurred him that although there was a lovely lump on the top of his head, it was nothing very serious. It was understood that there was not a minute to waste if they were wise. The Lockheed-Vega might blow in any time and give them trouble.

"We'll get both the prisoners together and Perk, you stand guard over them while I taxi our boat around here so as to save ourselves the job of moving them along the trail. Is it all right with you, buddy?"

"Sure is." came the ready reply. "I'll start a little chin with our honorable guest here an' see how he likes the idee o' sittin' up next Mr. Philip Ridgeway o' the Treasury Department

an' findin' out that this time he's in the soup for keeps."

Already the prisoner had recovered his customary nerve for on hearing what Perk was saying he broke out in a laugh.

"Looks a bit serious for me, I own up, boys," he said. "I give you credit for being ace high above all your class, for you've played a clever game and beat me by a mile. So that was tear-gas you tossed into the room, was it?—thought I recognized the smell and I want to tell you, once that hits a chap's eyes and he doesn't care if a church steeple topples down on him, he's that paralyzed."

Jack lost no time in starting back to where the ship was hidden and having negotiated the distance along the perilous trail without running afoul of anything, he managed to toss the palmetto leaves overboard since there was no further necessity for camouflage. After coaxing his charge out of the narrow slip, and once on the open lake, he taxied down to the cove close to the coquina rock shack.

They managed to lug their prisoners aboard and stowed them away as well as circumstances permitted. Then Jack gave her the gun and they were off.

Once they found themselves on their way at a three thousand-foot ceiling and headed almost

due northwest with Tampa as their goal, Perk slapped his pal on the back and gave vent to his high spirits.

"Oh how joyful it does seem, partner," he was saying, "to be startin' on the home stretch with our game played to a finish, the ducks bagged an' nigh ready for the spit. Somethin' to crow about this time, I guess boy. Mebbe the Big Boss up at Washington ain't goin' to be tickled pink when he gets the news an' knows we've grabbed Oswald by the heels with evidence aplenty to send him to Atlanta for a term o' years. This night flight promises to be the happiest ever for the pair o' us. I know I'm actin' like a loon, partner, but I jest can't help it—such bully occasions are too few an' far between in our line. An' now I wonder where we'll be sent for the next big job we tackle?"

"We'll know all that soon enough Perk," he was told by his comrade. "We deserve a little rest after this business is cleaned up, then we'll be ready to start out fresh and dandy, no matter if it takes us to the Wild West this time."

"Huh! why not?" grunted Perk with the air of one who was utterly indifferent as to whether he was given a mission that would take him to the other side of the world, as long as he had at his side the pal whom he loved so well and the backing of the Government to stand for expenses.

"We've worked the Mexican border to the limit, have jest cleaned up the worst smugglin' bunch along the Florida coast an' when the call comes for us to take a fling over the Colorado canyon, or above the snow capped mountain ranges, it'll find us ready an' all to the good!"

Although at the time Perk had not the slightest idea that he was posing as a prophet, it will be seen that such was the case as the title of the next story in this series will indicate, it being *"Wings Over the Rockies; or Jack Ralston's New Cloud-Chaser."*

THE END.

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